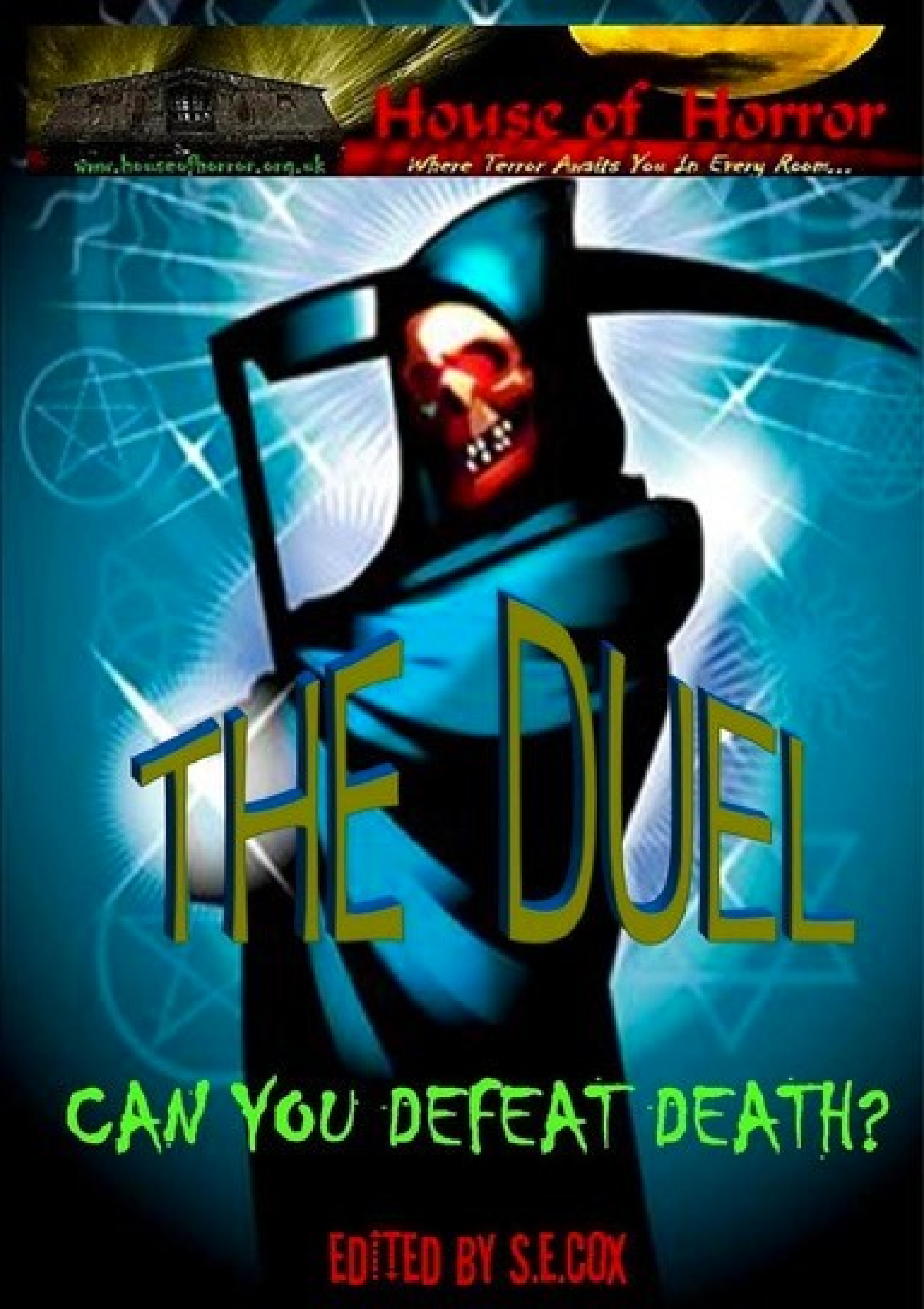

House of Horror
www.houseofhorror.org.uk
Where Terror Awaits You In Every Room...
THE DUEL
CAN YOU DEFEAT DEATH?
EDITED BY S.E.COX

House of Horror Presents

"The Duel"

Can You Defeat Death?

Copyright© House of Horror 2010

All Rights Reserved

First Printed in the United Kingdom

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, except in the case of brief quotations in critical reviews, without permission of the Author.

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, names, events and places are fictitious and products of the authors' imagination. Any similarities to actual persons–living or dead, places or events, is entirely coincidental.

Published by House of Horror
www.houseofhorror.org.uk

978-1-4466-4084-5

Contents

Introduction.....5

Round One.....7
Dwight the Fright Patterson and Nightmare

Round Two.....16
Dwight the Fright Patterson and Sir Bodsworth Rugglesby

Round Three.....24
Dwight the Fright Patterson and Wolverine

Round Four.....36
Dwight the Fright Patterson and The Atomizer

Round Five.....47
The Atomizer and Jayradikill

Round Six.....57
Jayradikill and Grim Squall

Round Seven.....67
Jayradikill and Deacon of Doom

Round Eight.....77
Jayradikill and Brundle

Round Nine.....85
Jayradikill and Lightbringer

Round Ten.....95
Jayradikill and The Bleeding Pen

Round Eleven.....108
Dragon Queen and Mountain Witch

Round Twelve.....117
Dragon Queen and Gash Panic

Round Thirteen.....129
The Final Round

The hand-picked crowd of spectators rowdily make their way through the underground passages and into the House of Horror Dungeon. They sit and eagerly await the arrival of the devilishly wicked House of Horror Madam. A loud crash is followed by a cloud of smoke. She appears and makes her way though the crowd, taking her seat on the throne of bones.

"Bring on the contenders!" she calls, her voice demanding, yet pleasing to the crowd.

Clicking and ticking, the steel doors of two cages rise. The contenders step into the fighting ring. They all bow to the Madam and the crowd goes wild. Baying for blood, each chant for their favourite to win. Fourteen have arrived. Only one will leave with their life.

Dwight the Fright – *AJ Brown*
Nightmare – *Lucas Pederson*
Sir Bodsworth Rugglesby – *Bob Eccles*
Wolverine – *Annemarie Bogart*
The Atomizer – *Adam Kesare*
Jayradikill – *Jared Blair*
Grim Squall – *Sean Grigsby*
Deacon of Doom – *David Harlow*
Brundle – *William Pauey III*
LightBringer – *Kaolin Fire*
The Bleeding Pen – *Alan Baxter*
Dragon Queen – *Mandy Ward*
Mountain Witch – *Sharon M. White*
Gash Panic – *Sean Monaghan*

Round One

Dwight the Fright 'V' Nightmare

Winner: Dwight the Fright

Peppermints and Smoke

By Dwight the Fright

"Get out! And you better be glad I'm not calling the cops!"

Courtney jerked her arm from the barkeep's grip, straightened her top and brushed loose strands of hair from her face. The door slammed, a hollow thud echoing in the gloomy night.

"Bastard!" She kicked the door, her toes buckling within the high heel. "Shit! Damn it!"

She slid off her shoes. Three toes on her right foot had swollen. Shades of red and purple replaced pale white skin. Courtney threw one of the shoes. It clattered on the side-walk and bounced into the opening of an alley near the bar. "Damn it!"

A light drizzle fell, chilling her skin, sending prickles along her spine. "Great," she said. "Kicked out of a bar and now my dress is going to be ruined."

She limped to the alley, picked up the shoe. The scent of peppermint and smoke wafted from the passageway. She lingered, staring into the dark lane. Pulling herself away, Courtney hobbled a few feet as the rain picked up.

“You've hurt your foot.”

Courtney looked back. “Who's there?”

“No one,” the man spoke from behind.

Her heart thumped hard, the hairs on her neck stiffened, stomach jumped. She spun around. Her head swooned, vision doubled. Vomit filled her throat. Courtney stumbled back, braced herself against the wall with one hand.

“I didn't mean to startle you.”

Courtney blinked, hoping her vision would clear.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” she said, her words not more than a whisper, but booming in her ears. She grimaced as her head throbbed. Tears spilled down her face.

“Let me help you.”

“No, I'm fine.”

She glanced up at the man, his features obscured by double vision. He seemed to float; his outline wavered like a mirage. He approached, one hand outstretched, his fingers impossibly long.

“I'm okay,” Courtney said and backed away, keeping her hand on the wall for support.

“You look like you are going to pass out.”

His voice hummed, sending tingles into her belly and thighs. Through the pain, she felt an intense pleasure creeping between her legs. Her heart skipped a beat, then another.

I'm okay,” she said, her voice weak.

“Are you?” His voice shimmered, caressed her body as if she were being held. Her belly and legs shivered and the pleasure of lust and fulfilment soaked her panties.

“Oh my… Oh my…” she moaned, but still backed away,

one hand out in front of her, the other guiding her along the cold wall.

Courtney glanced up. She could no longer make out the man's silhouette, but his crimson smile hung in the darkness of his body. “What's happening?”

“Everything you've ever wanted in a man—I can be that. I can be what you want, what you desire.”

She glanced up as another wave of pleasure spilled down her legs. Courtney staggered backward, her mouth open, jaw shaking, eyes wide. She let out a blissful laugh as her body shook in elation.

“I can be your all. You can be my slave…”

Courtney's head jerked up. The man moved toward her, his mouth open, teeth shimmering in the dark. She fell into the alley as he lunged for her with shadowy hands outstretched. Courtney screamed, tried to stand. Shards of pain shot from her broken toes, raced up her ankle and into her shin. She scrambled on hands and knees to the side-walk, trying to get out of the darkness that surrounded her.

“Help,” she cried out as the rain picked up, pelting the world with icy water. A hand gripped her ankle, slithered its way up her knee and between her legs. A tremble rolled through her and her body reacted with a violent orgasm, one that sent her sprawling onto her stomach, her hands and knees scraping ground. She convulsed and her eyes rolled back.

Sheets of rain fell around her, the thundering drops like tiny lovers along her skin, each one a pleasurable pain that made her scream out in ecstasy. The hand moved up her hips, wrapping themselves around her waist. With a jerk, Courtney was off the ground and being pulled deeper into the shadows.

The sudden movement snapped her from the reverie, spiking her with fear. She reached out, found nothing to grab. Her head snapped back as a hand pulled her hair. A scream filled her throat but died before it could escape as lips covered her mouth.

The rain stopped and the smell of peppermint and smoke hung in the air. Courtney's eyes fell on the grisly face of the man kissing her, the heavy stench of his decaying breath. A light-headed tingle swept over her as he stole her breath. Her eyes bulged and all the pleasure she had felt moments before were lost in the grip of suffocation. Lungs burning, she tried to push him away and realized she still held one of her shoes. With all of her weakening strength, she swung the heel at his head. She fell back when he released her. Acrid air filled her lungs and she coughed violently. The man clutched at his head, hands fumbling with the shoe as he descended deeper into the shadows, a howl tearing from his mouth.

Courtney crawled from the alley, her body trembling, head swooning. On the side-walk she slid onto her stomach, too exhausted to go further. Voices filled her ears before she passed out.

She awoke in a hospital room, the sun beaming through curtains, her strength spent, body aching. Courtney closed her eyes, the vague sense of the evening before lingering in her half-asleep mind. She allowed herself to doze, until a familiar aroma filled the room—the scent of peppermint and smoke… and outside it began to rain.

The Jackal of Cobble Alley

By Nightmare

A hand shoves her out through the doorway and into sprinkling rain.

Sam stumbles, catches her balance on a street light pole.

"Members only." The steel door clanks shut.

No one told her she had to be a fucking member of the club to get in. She shivers from the cold sprinkles of rain.

Sam knocks on the door. She'll get the car keys from Abby. She can hit a pub or something for a few hours.

A steel slat in the door slips open. Eyes appear in the two inch gap.

"I said members only."

"I need to talk to my friend and get her car keys."

"You'll have to wait until your friend leaves."

"You kidding me? It's raining. You expect me to stand here all night like this?"

"I really don't care what you do."

Sam's hands curl into tight fists.

The man sighs. "There's a pub two blocks up the street. You'll have to cut through Cobble Alley to get to it though."

"Cobble Alley?"

The steel slat snicks shut.

Above, the night sky rumbles with thunder.

* * *

The rain threatening to pour arrives, drenching Sam.

"Oh, this is just lovely," she growls to herself and forges ahead, head down.

Cobble Alley is dark and filthy. The only proof of an opening at the other end is nothing more than a pin-prick of light.

"Oh screw this," she says.

Water trickles down between her supple breasts.

Thunder booms, making Sam jump.

Rain drips from the tip of her nose.

Teeth chattering, Sam moves into the alley.

* * *

It's not as dark as she thought it was before entering.

She sees the dim hulks of overflowing dumpsters. She spots a few scuttling masses she realizes are rats. She catches glimmers of broken glass.

A sigh sounds. She stops walking. Her eyes squint, but there are only shadows up ahead.

A male voice says, "Perhaps you should have remained on the street."

Sam halts, backs away.

"Don't be frightened."

Sam doesn't stop. She has to get out of the alley.

"Stop, Sam."

A few feet away, a tall shadow detaches from the rest. She stops. She tries to move her legs, but they won't budge.

It moves toward her. Her knees quiver. Her lips part. Her nipples, which were already hard points, grow painfully taut.

"Who are you?"

"Jack."

"Jack, I need to get going." She tries to turn away, but her

legs betray her. She spills to the wet cobble stone of the alley.

A large hand grips her bicep. “It’s been so long.”

Sam shrieks, yanks her arm out of its hand and scrambles to her feet. She hurries toward the opening from which she entered and—

“Stop.”

She nearly topples to the pavement again.

Hot breath puffs in her ear. “It’s been so long since I’ve had a woman.” Rough hands slip up and down her arms and something inside Sam breaks. Warmth spills through her sex.

Steamy breaths in her ear. “Just relax. Give yourself to me.”

She moans. All thoughts about this being wrong evaporate. There’s only his voice in her ear, his hands sliding up and down her arms, so slow, so intent on their purpose.

They turn her around. Sam looks up into the utter black shadow.

“Let go.” The hands move the straps of her top from her shoulders. Long, pale fingers slide over her wet shoulders.

Her eyes close. A voice inside screams this is wrong. Just what the hell do you think you’re doing? This is a monster caressing you!

But the voice is only a small echo in the back of her mind. Pleasure overrides fear; passion ignites in her chest like a blow torch.

“Let go, Sam.”

A soft moan escapes her parting lips, blowing a plume of white vapor into the rainy air.

Both her top and bra rips off her. A hand cups one of her bare breasts. A rough thumb brushes the tip of her nipple and

Sam nearly screams. Warm lips find the curve of her neck and kiss. Lips part and teeth gently nip her skin, sending her sex into sizzling hums.

Then her skirt is gone. Fingers probe her mound. She opens her legs, and the fingers slip over her clitoris. Sam sucks in a sharp breath.

"Every monster has its pleasure," it whispers.

The fingers moved. Her breath quickens.

"Who are you," she pants.

"They call me the Jackal of Cobble Street."

The Jackal's hands grip her butt lifting her into the air.

The Jackal's hot breath puffs into her face, and then its huge penis slips inside of her. It lowers her slowly down the shaft until she howls. It goes deeper than any lover she's ever had.

Its lips fix on her neck. She bucks on the Jackal's penis, shifting and gyrating. The hands lift her, lower her, lift, lower.

Hot liquid fire explodes through her middle, her back arches.

She comes in shuddery jerks, screaming with every convulsion.

Her eyes close.

"Now," whispers the Jackal. "You're mine."

* * *

Sam's eyes open. She tries to sit up, but can't.

"Never trust a dark stranger in an alley, Sam. You never know what monsters you'll find."

A pale face moves into her view. Crimson lips curl into a

lengthy grin. It holds a loop of greyish-blue rope to its mouth. A black tongue snakes out and licks a drop of from blood it.

"Mmmm," the creature croons. "So tasty. Do you know what this is, Sam?"

She tries to speak. Nothing comes out. She can't move.

"It's your intestines."

Tears well in her eyes.

"You can't move because of my venom, my come." The thing's face elongates, changing into the muzzle of a dog, and its large fangs snap the loop in two.

She watches it eat pieces of her, fingers, kidneys, bladder, until it holds her still beating heart before her face.

Then she slips into darkness, with only the cackling giggle of the Jackal to keep her company.

Round Two

Dwight The Fright 'V' Sir Bodsworth Rugglesby

Winner: Dwight the Fright

To Bleed…

By Dwight the Fright

I am pain. To know me is to feel me. To feel me is to hurt. To hurt is to bleed. To bleed is to live…

* * *

Kendra sits naked in the center of the crumbling house. Flickering candles encircle her and she clutches a knife in both hands.

The house groans, its roof sagging, dry rot has set in on several spots in the floor, brown patches of mold cling to the ceiling. The walls are untouched by time, elements and ruin. Images, offered up by many others line the length from corner to corner, intertwining with each other; visages that move and swirl, as if breathing.

Outside, rain pours, lightning flashes and thunder follows. Wind batters the ancient house. A window cracks, breaks. Shards of glass fall to the floor. Somewhere in the distance someone is calling, but the voice is too far off for her to care, for her to listen to the pleas of a distrustful and misunderstood lover.

I am pain. To know me is to feel me…

"I feel nothing," she whispers. "I want to feel."

She lifts the knife, its blade glistening yellow/orange in the candles' dancing flames.

Feel me…

The cool blade slices through the skin of one thigh, but only deep enough to draw tiny beads of blood. Kendra's breath hitches, eyes widen. Her lip quivers as the pain tingles, subsides, leaving only a slight sting in its wake. A smile forms as her leg begins to itch. She wants to scratch it, but to feel… to feel anything is better than the nothing she has felt since…

Daniel's voice rings out, closer, calling.

Kendra glances at the door, a bolt holding it closed.

I am pain. To know me is to feel me… Feel me…

Kendra slides the blade across her other thigh, deeper then the first cut. Skin peels aside as blood spills down the sides of her leg. She shivers as the wave of pain dies off as quickly as it was born.

Focusing on the painting of an angel with black wings and blue eyes, Kendra brings the knife from knee to hip, a deeper slice. A cry escapes her as muscle pares from muscle and blood cascades from another wound. The angel's wings shimmer, its chest heaves, eyes twinkle.

A tingle of fear creeps through her, sending goose bumps along her skin. Her nipples harden and the hairs on the nape of her neck stand on end.

To feel me is to hurt…

The angel steps from the wall, tearing away from sheetrock and walking inches above the floor. His golden hair sways behind him as if a breeze blows through the house.

Do you hurt?

A tear spills down Kendra's cheek.

“Always.”

* * *

Her eyes once sparkled when she thought of Daniel.

“It's over?”

“I don't love you anymore,” he said, not looking at her.

“But, we're getting married.”

“No. No, we're not.”

He walked away, leaving her sitting in the restaurant, their meals untouched. She stared at the Italian dish with its marinara sauce and Parmesan cheese covering the almost heart shaped piece of chicken breast.

Hours passed and she left at closing time. Head down, she walked in the rain until she found herself in front of the only house on Wayley Street, a tiny dilapidated structure with no inviting characteristics. The door opened and she heard the whispers…

* * *

To hurt is to bleed…

Kendra's heart breaks all over again—a hurt she had forced aside—and she brings the knife across her bicep. Tissue severs, pulls from bone. Her arm throbs and blood covers it in red, dripping off her fingertips and blending with the dust and grime of the floor. Her vision blurs, breathing becomes harder.

The angel kneels, dips his finger into the blood pooling around her legs and licks his finger. The other images cry out and hiss in both anger and elation. One of them extends a hand,

ripping it from the wall, but can't break free.

"Kendra!" Daniel yells for her. Sharp raps echo through the room. "Kendra, open the door."

He'ssssss here, whispers the picture of a snake that stretches the four corners of the room. The other paintings writhe on the wall, struggling to break free from a canvas that holds them tight.

* * *

"I can't live without you."

"You've lost your mind, Kendra."

The phone went silent, then beeped as she listened, stunned by his apathy. She clicked the phone off, then back on. Kendra dialed, waited. Daniels' message service followed two rings. She bit her lip, almost hung up, but instead spoke. "If I can't have you, I don't want to live." Before hanging up, she spoke the words she heard when passing the house on the far side of town. Calmly, she recited the address, hung up the phone and set it on her nightstand.

She awoke with knife in hand, candles lit and the house whispering to her. Her body was numb, her mind a heavy fog of memories that no longer felt real.

* * *

Kendra's vision clears as she flays away part of her forearm. Skin falls to the floor and her jaw quakes with the fresh pain that sears her senses. Her blood seeps into the rotting wood beneath her. Tendrils sprout from the floor, crawl into her skin, rooting her in place. The paintings screech and groan, howl

with lust as she pulls the blade across her palm and smears the blood on her abdomen.

Outside the room, Daniel yells for her, beats on the door. Several heavy thuds rattle the frame until the bolt splinters wood and the door slams open. She sees him, smiles weakly.

“You came,” she whispers.

In three long strides, Daniel is across the room and kneeling in the circle beside her. “What are you doing, Kendra? Trying to kill yourself?”

“Trying to live,” she says, her green eyes staring up at him but only seeing a vague semblance of Daniel.

To bleed is to live…

Daniel spins, loses his balance and lands on his bottom. The angel stands in front of him, ethereal features swimming, wings dripping crimson and hate in its eyes. “What the Hell?”

“Do it," the angel speaks.

Kendra drives the knife into Daniel's back, between two ribs and into his heart. She pulls it free, stabs him again and again even after he slumps to the floor, blood flowing into the dry rotting wood.

“To bleed is to live,” Kendra sobs.

Images pull free from the wall, creeping forward, bathing in Daniel's blood, lapping it up with starving tongues. The snake swallows his body, returns to the wall, satiated for the time.

Kendra brings the knife across her right breast, a deep wound that sends slivers of hot pain coursing through her body. She trembles, slices her left breast, deeper … deeper each time, shaving flesh from bone.

With each cut the pain heightens, though her senses dull.

To bleed is to live… Live, my angels…

The images converge on Kendra, their hands and claws pulling at her, teeth nipping into ruined flesh, tearing meat away as her blood flows onto the floor. She doesn't scream as darkness takes her into its arms, folds her away.

One by one the pictures retreat, taking their place along the walls, blending with the once white interior, until lastly, the angel takes his place among the dead, nearest a fresh image, still wet, its artwork and artist forever one. The woman cradles her lover in red tinted arms, his eyes full with fear, his heart sitting in her open palm.

A trickle of blood seeps from the heart, tracing down the wall and pooling on the floor beneath the image.

And the angel whispers one last time, *To bleed is to live. To live is to die…*

Foul Harvest

Sir Bodsworth Rugglesby

Death descended on the frozen fields of the Eastern Front on a sub-zero night in February of 1915. It settled on a branch in a barren tree, where it watched and waited. It had played this waiting game before, and it always turned out the same way. Different times, different places, but always the same result.

Death's taloned feet sunk into the tree's rotting wood. Its massive wings wrapped around its bony body. Its glowing red eyes scanned the battlefield in anticipation of the events to come.

The German soldiers huddled in a trench on one side of the field; Russian troops entrenched on the opposite side. At

Death's arrival both the Germans and the Russians felt nauseating knots develop in the pits of their stomachs. A young German lieutenant clutched a tattered photograph of his wife, suddenly overcome by the certainty that he would never see her again. A thousand miles away the lieutenant's wife wept in her sleep. A Russian sergeant pulled out the crucifix that hung from a gold chain around his neck and rubbed the tiny replica of Christ's body with his thumb as he recited the 23rd Psalm.

A blinding white light lit up the winter sky – a flare – the signal for the assault to begin. Russian and German soldiers scrambled out of their trenches, rifles held out in front of them, bayonets fixed, voices raised in the half-hearted battle cries of men who knew they were already dead.

A German soldier who had been unable to bring himself to leave the trench crouched in the dark pit with his hands over his ears. He felt moisture soaking through his coat and turned to find a waterfall of blood cascading down the trench wall.

Death watched as the battle played out on the snow-covered field. As each soldier fell, Death's eyes glowed brighter, and what passed for a smile spread across its unspeakable face. The frozen fields ran red with the blood of allies and enemies alike.

When the gunfire stopped, and when the last of the voices of the dying were silenced, Death once again took wing. Death flew over the trench where the lone German soldier huddled, trembling. The soldier looked up and Death pointed a long, taloned finger at him, marking him, before flying away. The soldier's mind snapped. Some time later the medics found him nearly catatonic, lying at the bottom of the trench and mumbling "Mein Gott, all dies Blut!" *(My God, all this*

blood!) A brain aneurysm claimed the soldier's life before he reached the field hospital, and Death's foul harvest was complete.

Round Three

Dwight the Fright 'V' Wolverine

Winner: Dwight the Fright

Sitting Under the Sycamore Tree

By Dwight the Fright

I told Cassie I loved her as I pushed her on the swing that hung down from the tall Sycamore at the edge of the field behind my parents' house.

"What?" she asked, brought the swing to an abrupt stop. She looked at me through crystal blue eyes, her head cocked slightly to the side. "What did you say?"

A lump caught in my throat, palms began to sweat and tears formed in my own eyes. "I said I love you."

She nodded, turned around, placed both hands on the ropes of the swing. "Okay. You can push me again."

I stood there for a moment, not sure what to do; not sure I liked or disliked her reaction. I had expected more. Like maybe Cassie hopping off the swing, hugging me and saying she loved me also. Leaning forward, I placed my hands on the small of her back and pushed.

I was eight and knew love for the first—and only—time in my life.

She left my house that afternoon, skipping the way she always did. At the end of the driveway, she turned, smiled. "I

love you, too, Joshua Turner."

Three days later Cassie was dead, her mangled body found not far from Grover's Pond, on the other side of our property. Momma told me someone had done something bad to her. The truth is, some pervert raped, then stabbed her to death. Cassie—my Cassie—was gone forever.

So, I thought.

I sat at the base of the Sycamore the morning after her funeral, head in my hands, tears streaming down my face, heart broken in half. The sun beat down on the world, promising another hot summer day. Taking a deep breath, I looked up. The swing swayed forward, hung in the air for a second, swayed back. My skin swam with goose bumps. The swing repeated the process, forward then back.

I stood, legs weak. The swing pushed forward again, stopped. The branch that held it creaked and the swing turned sideways, as if someone were sitting on it and looking back at me.

Backing up, I inched away, each step bringing me closer to my house and further from the tree. The swing dropped back to its normal position. I turned to run, stopped when I heard the echo of her voice.

"Don't leave."

"Who's there?" I asked.

"Don't leave me, Joshua."

My bladder felt heavy, threatening to release a hot stream down my leg. "Cassie?"

"Joshua."

My mouth became dry. "Where are you, Cassie?"

"I don't know. I'm scared, Joshua."

I shook my head and pinched my arm, hoping I would wake myself from the nightmare. I winced as pain rippled up my forearm.

"Cassie, can you see me?"

"Yes. Can you see me?"

"No."

Silence followed.

"Cassie," I hesitated. "You're dead."

Who knew ghosts could cry? Her sobs echoed all around me. I pictured her dropping to her knees, her face covered by her hands, shoulders shaking.

"Cassie?"

I went to the swing. It was much cooler there. Touching the rope, I felt her arm. In that instant, I saw the many stab wounds, her torn dress and bruised face; her split lip; the tears in her blue eyes. She took my hand, opened her mouth to speak but said nothing. Instead, she embraced me, putting her head on my shoulder. I shivered, my teeth clacking together as I stood, freezing.

Cassie released me, stepped back. I rubbed my arms and let the sun warm me. Our eyes met and I was pulled into her world, her final few minutes of life. She barely saw the man who grabbed her, catching only a glimpse of jeans and old brown work boots before a potato sack was shoved over her head. He dragged her down to Grover's Pond, Cassie kicking and screaming until he leveled a heavy hand to the side of her head. The rest… the pain, the fear, the very life bleeding from her… I endured as well.

I fell to my knees, vomited. Freezing and scared, I crawled a few feet away, vomited again. Dropping onto my

back, I tried to regain some sense of where I was, who I was. Cassie knelt beside me.

"Do you know who killed you?" I asked between deep breaths.

"No."

"I'm going to find out."

The next few weeks I spent looking at people's feet, hoping to catch a glimpse of badly scuffed brown work boots. When I wasn't searching for her killer, I spent as much time by the Sycamore tree with Cassie as I could. She swung and I watched as it swayed forward then back.

A month into my investigation, I found her killer, Tommy Tillman—the deputy sheriff. He was young, maybe not even in his thirties. There was nothing I could do—contacting the police would do no good. Telling my parents? I thought about it. Instead, I kept an eye on Tillman, watching to see if he would strike again. During that time, he didn't and Cassie's death appeared like a random murder.

Dad died two years after Cassie. Mom moved us away, closer to her home in Nebraska. Years passed and seven other little girls, around the ages of eight to twelve, disappeared from my hometown in the south. I knew who had taken these girls; I knew they were all probably dead.

At eighteen, I left home for a small college in South Carolina—less than a hundred miles from home. We still owned the old house and farm but time and the elements had worn it down. Windows were broken and a wino had moved in, wrecked the inside.

The rope had broken and the swing lay by the Sycamore tree. I picked it up, held it close to my heart.

"Cassie?"

I waited, repeated her name and listened.

"Joshua?"

My heart lifted.

"Yes, it's me."

"You came back."

"Cassie, I know who killed you."

"You do?"

"Yes… and it's time he got punished."

I went back to the house, called the police from my cell phone, told him I wanted to speak to the sheriff. An hour later, Tillman met me on the front porch of my childhood home.

"What's all this about, Mister…?"

"There's a bum inside my house."

"This is your home?" Tillman raised an eyebrow.

"It belongs to my family. I want the bum gone."

Tillman walked inside, but the wino was gone, ran off before I made the call.

"There's no one here."

"I think he went out to the Sycamore tree out in the field."

"You said he was in the house."

"I was wrong."

Tillman made his way to the Sycamore, where only a rope hung from a branch and several pictures were nailed to the tree. He yanked one photo free.

"Recognize her?" I asked.

He glanced up at me just as I swung at him. I caught him below the left ear. He fell to the ground, rolled onto his feet and into a crouch. He drew his revolver, aimed at me. "What the

fuck are you doing, boy?"

"Her name was Cassie—the girl in the picture. You murdered her ten years ago."

"I don't know what you're talking about, punk, but I'm arresting you for assaulting a police officer."

"The other girls—you murdered them, too, didn't you?"

Recognition dawned on Tillman's face. He laughed. "You think you're smart, kid?"

I shrugged. I don't know what I was thinking not having a weapon with me. Maybe I thought love would protect me. Tillman leveled his gun at me, pulled the trigger. My shoulder screamed as the bullet tore through the socket, shattering bone and coming out my back. I lay on the ground, blood seeping into the hot earth. Tillman's shadow loomed over me, the sun behind him. Shading my eyes I saw the revolver a couple of feet from my head.

"No!"

Startled, Tillman turned around as Cassie rushed for him, sinking both of her ghostly hands into his ribs. Tillman fired several times, the bullets striking the ground near his feet but doing no damage to Cassie. She held him there until his face turned blue and he collapsed, dead at her feet. Turns out love did protect me.

Cassie faded. I caught a glimpse of tears in her eyes before she was gone for good.

Folks around here say Tillman up and left. Turns out another cop had the same suspicions I did and had gathered enough evidence to prove it. I have hung the swing from the same branch it used to be on. Every day I walk out to the Sycamore tree and sit in the shade. I call for Cassie, but she's

gone, this time probably forever. I hope I'm wrong. I hope one day the swing will sway again; that I'll hear her voice again… hear Cassie tell me she loves me…

Scorned

By Wolverine

Pain. Jim's eyes snapped open, the sensation stabbed his system into full consciousness. He looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. A fire roared from inside a soot-covered stone fireplace. The room looked like a hunter's cabin. Deer heads peered from paneled walls, the surprise still caught in their dead eyes. *Where the hell am I?*

His arms and legs throbbed. The sudden return of awareness made him forget, just for a moment, the sharp aching in all his appendages. Jim looked down, stifling a scream. What looked like make-shift splints were tied to his thighs. His arms were pulled behind him, the same home-made handiwork adorned his visible forearms. *What the fuck?*

Jim tried to get up. He couldn't. Peering down, his legs were fastened to the chair with duct tape. The small attempt at moving sent shots of pain traveling up his body. His breath quickened as sweat formed over his brow. Through gritted teeth, a small whimper escaped his lips, hardly audible over the licking flames of the intense fire.

Thoughts whirled through his mind trying to remember what happened. Jim recalled staying late to grade papers. Then, he made his way to his Camry parked in the teacher's lot at about five-thirty. The sun descended quickly on the horizon. He set his backpack on the car while he attempted to find the keys

playing hide and seek at the bottom of his bag. Heels clomped against the black top. Jim didn't look up until it was too late. He caught a flash of long auburn hair, then a cloth clamped over his nose and mouth, then nothing.

Jim tried to shake the cobwebs from his thoughts, but he just couldn't remember anything else. Then, he heard footsteps echo against the wooden walls. Heels.

"Forgive me. I didn't realize you were awake. What a terrible host I am."

Jim's eyes floated towards the feminine voice and widened at what he saw. The woman appeared to be about thirty-five or forty, but she was dressed in a Catholic school girl's uniform. Her over-done make-up made her features appear harsh. Her lipstick bled crimson streaks into tiny lines around her upturned mouth. The smile seemed a far cry from friendly, its menace sent chills through his body. Goosebumps sprouted over his bruised arms.

"What have you done to me? What is going on here?"

Jim spat the words toward the grinning woman. She held pieces of wood in her hands.

"Hold it, hold it. One question at a time, Teach." She walked past him towards the fire. A wooden slab brushed against his sore arm as she passed. He winced and swallowed the yelp that tried to escape.

"This is the back and seat of a basic school chair." She held up the seat like a game show model before opening the screen and tossing it into the fire. The flames licked around it, making it transform from honey brown to blackened ember.

"The rest of the chair is affixed to your broken bones. If you ever escape here, let it be known that I, personally, set the

bones myself."

Set the bones? Jim closed his eyes. Confusion swam in his thoughts, making rational thinking almost impossible.

"I can see your bewilderment. Okay, I confess, I was the one who broke them to begin with, but I think I should get some points for mending them."

Her voice held that sing-song quality that once passed the age of ten is deemed creepy. She was well past ten.

"I don't understand any of this! Why are you doing this?"

Jim's voice sounded desperate. He didn't care; every sense in his body told him he was in danger, grave danger.

"Oh come on, Mister Dee. I didn't think introductions were needed after all the intimacy we shared. I mean, granted, it's been over twenty years, but still, I thought I was more memorable than that."

The woman walked out of his line of vision, behind him.

"Am I to believe you seduce all your students?"

Jim's brain whirled, the words danced in his head like a fine ballerina, spinning. *Seduce?*

Nothing she said made sense. Firstly, he was quite sure he never touched any of his students. Secondly, over twenty years ago he was a teenager himself. Thirdly, who the hell was Mister Dee? This lady proved not only violent, but delusional. Jim debated even furthering the bizarre conversation, wondering if it would do any good or maybe just cause more harm.

"I'm not Mister Dee! You have the wrong man!"

There, he'd said it. Jim wasn't sure where that would lead him, but figured the chances were slim and none that this kook would let him walk out of here either way, so why not?

Movement in his left peripheral caused Jim to turn his head. She approached carrying a stack of yellowed newspapers. One by one she lifted pages and crumbled the paper into balls, leaving a trail behind her as she meandered across the room. When she reached him, she dropped the stack to the floor. A solid thump radiated across the room. Her hands flew to her cheeks and her mouth opened in mock surprise, almost like a bad Macauley Culkin impersonation from "Home Alone".

"You're not Mister Dee! Oh dear, I've made a terrible mistake!"

Her shoulders rocked as the girlish laughter emitted from her mouth. The eerie sound invaded his ears.

"Do you think I'm some sort of nut?"

She shook her head and bent down to her papers, kneeling beside them and continuing her quest to paper ball the entire stack. Something deep inside told Jim maybe she didn't want that question answered. He watched her meticulously go through the stack in silence. After balling the last paper, she stood.

"To tell you the truth, I call all of you Mister Dee." Jim's eyes widened at her admission. His heart thumped against his chest, every beat raced to beat the one before. He felt his mouth go dry as he watched her open the fire screen.

"You see, Mister Dee suffered a fate much like yours many years ago. Only that time, I used my actual school chair to bash his skull in. I thought it gave the death some substance, made it more personal. Don't you? See with you, I just slammed a chair against your body 'til it fell apart. The chair, I mean."

Her giggle sent the hairs up the back of his neck to full

attention. Jim wished she would stop talking, he tried to shut off her words but they continued to penetrate his ears. Softly, he prayed, trying to let the goodness of the words comfort his frightened soul.

"It's not like the monster didn't have it coming. I was twelve for Pete's sake! Did he not think that might cause just a little psychological damage?"

Jim shook his head, wishing he could put his thoughts in a better place. His efforts were fruitless.

"You would think after I rid the world of him that I would be at peace. Well, to tell you the truth, I kind of liked it. I realize you're not Mister Dee, but I'm sure there's some horrible thing you got away with in the past. Well, it's reckoning time."

Tears slid from Jim's eyes, though closed, the salty liquid still flowed. The heat from the fire dried the moisture on his cheeks before they reached their full potential. A distinct aroma assaulted his nostrils. *Gasoline.* Jim's eyes snapped open and he saw her squirting the fuel over the newspapers. She tossed the can across the room and sauntered towards Jim. "Well, I'd hate to just chat and go like this, but I'd rather not be here when the place goes up in flames."

Her girlish laugh permeated the room. Jim heard her heels clap across the room.

"Please, don't do this!"

Jim knew it was useless, but his body couldn't help it. He struggled against the restraints, pain stabbing deep into him with every movement. He kicked a paper ball closer to the open fire. It ignited sending the ball into a glowing orange and blue globe. "Oh, I have to. Didn't you ever hear that saying "Hell

hath no fury like a woman scorned?" Well, Mister Dee, you have no idea how true that is. Well, maybe you do."

Her irritating laughter was the last sound he heard before she opened the door. The wind gust made some balls swirl into the fire. The door's slam sent the small house into silence. Jim screamed, the flames leaped from the hearth engulfing the paper at his feet. The fire touched his shoes. Wildly, Jim thrashed. The chair fell sideways, and the teacher's cheek connected to the floor with a solid thump. Jim felt the flames against his scalp. The smell of burnt hair and visions of hell's fury became his last conscious memory before he closed his eyes and never again awoke.

Round Four

Dwight the Fright 'V' The Atomizer

Winner: The Atomizer

Lost and Found

By Dwight the Fright

It didn't look like she thought it would. Kyra expected to see a seedy run-down government building when she arrived, much like all the other ones in the cities of the world. Instead it looked brand new and out of place among the ruins of yesterday. There were no windows on the lower floors, as to be expected with the post apocalyptic building codes that were established a year earlier. Twenty feet above the reinforced steel doors sat a guard in a bucket turret.

“Can I help you?” the guard called down, his voice amplified by a megaphone.

“Yes, sir,” Kyra said. “I'm looking for my mother.”

“What makes you think she is here?”

“She was one of the Infected.”

“Early or recent strain?”

“Early, sir. She was one of the first Infected.”

The man stood silent, his rifle over his shoulder, eyes hidden by sunglasses. "When the door buzzes, open and go inside—you will have three seconds to get the door open. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

A loud hum followed and the door's lock clicked. Kyra grabbed the handle and opened the door. She went inside, the door hissing closed behind her. The sound of steel on steel and the locks re-engaging startled her. Kyra looked back, her mouth dry and the hairs on her arms on end. Her stomach twisted into knots.

A dimly lit corridor led the way to a door that read LOST AND FOUND. She went inside where a bright white light blinded her. She shielded her eyes with one hand. Scared citizens stood in several lines leading to bored workers behind thick Plexiglas.

Holes formed a circular pattern for communication purposes.

Kyra stepped into the closest and shortest line, alongside a thin man with dirty red hair. He held a picture of a family in happier days, a mom, dad and three children. “Next.”

The man stepped forward, spoke in a hushed whisper.

“Speak up,” the woman behind the counter said. She adjusted her glasses, frowned.

The man slid the picture across the counter. “I just want to know if my family is here.”

Kyra’s heart cracked, a pain stretched down into her belly.

The man and lady exchanged a few more words and his shoulders slumped. “They’re all dead?”

“Terminated, sir—they were among the second wave of Infected.”

“But, they were my family.”

“Next,” the woman said, ignoring the man’s words. He stood another moment.

“Sir, you need to move along before I contact security.”

Kyra caught the tears tracing down his face as he turned to leave. She closed her eyes and longed for the days before the Infection took over and wiped out billions of people, for them only to rise again a few hours later with animalistic instincts and a hunger for flesh. Pockets of survivors fought to gain control of the world again. What was left of the military leveled entire cities, annihilating the living and the dead.

"Next," the woman yelled.

The kid behind Kyra nudged her. "Go on, Ma'am," he said, his big brown eyes staring up at her with impatience. She went to the counter, her legs weak.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked.

"I… My mom… I was wondering…"

"Spit it out, girl, I don't have all day." Kyra pulled a photo from her purse, placed it against the glass. "Have you seen this woman?"

"What's her name?"

"Leslie Mason. She was forty-two when she became infected."

"First or second wave?"

"First."

The woman typed the name into the computer, waited, glanced at Kyra. "Where is she from?"

"West Beach."

"Do you know what she was wearing when she became infected?"

Kyra thought back to the day her mother died. She had been bringing groceries inside when she began coughing. Her face turned blue and she clutched at her throat as her eyes bulged. Blood spilled from her ears, nose and eyes. She

dropped to her knees, then fell on her face.

"Momma?" Kyra had run to her. Leslie convulsed, her body jerking for several seconds before growing still. Kyra stood over her, shock racing through her body, making her numb. Others around the neighborhood fell sick, dying within minutes of the Infection. Screams echoed through the streets.

Kyra ran inside, her hands over her face. The phone beeped its busy signal when she dialed emergency. The media told the story later that day—thousands in West Beach had died along with millions of others around the world. A new fear formed in her mind. What if she were infected? She bolted the door and waited for Momma to rise again.

"Hey, Missy." The lady slapped the glass. "Wake up."

Kyra shook her head. "She was wearing a blue top and tan slacks."

The lady turned the screen so Kyra could see. "Is that her?"

Kyra's heart fluttered, her stomach sank. A lump formed in her throat. A woman shambled along with a group of other zombies, their bodies decaying meat clinging to bones, vacant stares met with other vacant stares. It was no mistake, even with gray sagging skin and most of her hair matted to her head.

"Momma."

"Oh boy," the woman said and wiped her mouth. "What do you want us to do with her?"

"What do you mean?" Kyra asked.

"What do you want us to do with her? We can only put down the Infected with the next of kin's consent."

"I don't understand."

"Either you take her off our hands and take responsibility

for her or we put her down—with your permission, of course."

"Put her down?"

"We put a bullet in her head—she'll be permanently dead."

The pit in her stomach swelled, climbed into her chest. Kyra placed a hand on the counter, steadied herself against the wave of light-headedness that swept through her.

"What do you want to do?"

"Can I ask a question?"

The woman shrugged. "Go ahead."

"Can I put her down?"

"What?" The woman's eyes became wide, her mouth ajar.

"I want to be the one who puts the bullet in her head. Can I?"

The woman picked up the phone, punched a number, talked quickly. A minute later she set the receiver down. "You're one messed up woman," she said and pointed to a door off to the right. It buzzed, clicked. "Down the hall, second door on the left."

Kyra made her way to the room, waited inside until two men in white coats came in through a separate door. Her mother stumbled between them, her mouth clamped shut with a steel bit between her teeth. She struggled against her restraints, but couldn't break free.

One of the men, big and burly, his eyes set with an angry frown, stepped forward, produced a gun. "Here."

"Thank you," Kyra said and then to her mother, "Momma, can you hear me?"

Leslie looked up, stopped struggling and cocked her head to one side.

"Can you hear me? It's me, Kyra, your daughter. Are you in there?" A tear traced down Kyra's face and she thought about the man in the lobby, his entire family wiped out. Her heart broke in half.

"Put her down," one of the men said, his jaw clenched tight.

"I'm sorry, Momma," she said and raised the pistol, squeezed the trigger. The top of the burly security guard's head disappeared in a spray of blood, brain and gristle. Kyra fired a second shot, killing the other man. "I'm sorry, Momma. I wish I had been a better child to you. Maybe we can start over. Maybe I can take care of you."

She stepped over one of the dead men, took the steel bit from Leslie's mouth. "Eat up, Momma."

Delicacy

By The Atomizer

"In Japan they call it Zonbi," the man in white said while snatching the menu from the Texan. "It is deadly if not cooked properly, but as my Michelin stars will attest, I can cook it properly."

"It's, well, it's," the Texan stammered, "a lot like that pointy fish that you have to cut just right."

"Fugu," the Chef answered. "The fish *was* called fugu, and it was poisonous if not cut correctly. As someone who has tasted that particular dish, I can assure you that is where the similarities end. All the fish are dead, and besides, this is better. This is red meat."

"Yeah, I mean the wars must have been hell on a fancy restaurant like this," the man waved his hand around to illustrate his point. The empty restaurant was London-chic, with chandeliers, large silken tapestries and even a dessert cart. "I mean, ten thousand is still a lot of money, even after the crash. As the chef, would you say it's worth it?"

The chef, who a few minutes ago was so happy to see somebody, anybody walk into his eatery, was growing tired of this man. He was tired of his accent, he was tired of his attire, and he was weary with his indecision. In the good old days he would never have had to talk to a customer, his restaurant would never even serve somebody without a suit coat. He let himself exhale a small sigh before reassuring the plebian diner in front of him, "Sir, I guarantee you it is worth it."

"Well it sounds weird, but then again some people used to eat chilled monkey brains, right?"

"I believe that was only in a film sir, but exotic cuisine has always included items *you* might call *weird*." The chef's condescension had gone heretofore unnoticed by the big man in the flannel shirt and Texas tie.

"Now, now fella," the Texan furrowed his brow. "I'm only passing through the city looking for work. I know you think I'm some kind of rube, but that doesn't mean you can piss all over me when my money is green and my stomach is empty. Now gimme some of your god damn weirdo food and stop curling your fucking lip."

"I apologize sir, you're right. That was rude of me, but as you can see business has been better." The restaurant was completely empty, not only of patrons but of staff as well. There were no busboys or wait staff, the coat-check stall stood

empty and the maitre d' stand was unmanned.

"I understand," the Texan said. "This can't be easy for you, going from lines out the door where people drop major coin to eat your crazy ass French food, to most of the population dead and the rest waiting on government breadlines for their grub."

"No, sir, it was unforgivably rude of me. Let me make it up to you with the best post-plague meal you've had."

"Well that's a mighty lofty offer, and I think I just might like to take you up on it. Zonbi it is then." The Texan rubbed his hands together. "I also have one small request, would it be possible to see the Kitchen?"

"Usually I would say it would be out of the question, but it does not look like we'll be having many more guests tonight, so OK. I must warn you though that the preparation of Zonbi can be a bit much for the squeamish."

"Well that's fine by me. Who in their right mind is squeamish these days, anyway? I mean, besides the dead 'uns," the Texan laughed and the Chef did not, but instead tried his very best to crack a polite smile.

The Chef motioned for the western man to get up and when he did he pushed in his seat and folded his napkin back up. He then picked up the Texan's soiled bread plate and brought it with them to the kitchen.

The Chef dropped the plate in one of the large state-of-the-art stainless steel sinks and made a grand gesture with his hands. The world outside was full of burnt-out buildings and crumbling moral infrastructure, but standing in the restaurant's kitchen you would never have known it. The walls were spotless snow-white tile, and there wasn't a single crumb to be

found on any of the service stations. There were a few canned items on the shelf, which used to be a sign of a lacking restaurant, but these days was a necessity since many basic ingredients simply did not exist anymore.

"Wow, quite a setup you have here, Chief," the Texan said as he ran his finger across a countertop to check for dust.

"Thank you, it was hard to keep all the grout work unscathed during the first several weeks and months of the outbreak, but I think this little fortress was probably what kept me alive, so I try to take good care of it." He frowned as the Texan started to touch his cutlery.

"Where do you keep the stiffs?"

The Chef wrinkled his nose, the bluntness and vulgarity with which the man was talking about his profession was insulting, but he had promised the man a meal and a meal it would be.

"I keep them in the fridge. The cold air not only keeps them fresher but also decreases mobility," the Chef said.

"Mobility? You telling me they're up and moving around in there? That has got to be some kind of illegal, buddy boy."

"Oh it's perfectly safe, would you care for a look?"

The Texan nodded and worked his way over to the big steel door in the corner and put his face up against the walk-in freezer's small circular window. Peering inside he could see two bodies, lying on their backs, and restrained by two leather straps at their head and chest. The Chef pressed down on a lever and the large metal door opened slightly with a hiss.

The bodies began to stir slightly as the Texan stepped in. Once inside he got a better look at the bodies. The larger one, male, was all but picked clean. His legs were skeletal and there

were large portions of his abdomen missing. The smaller, a young female, must have been a more recent catch, as she bore no wounds except for the "turning bite" at her jugular, which had all but decimated her neck so that her head was barely connected to the rest of her body. The Texan was surprised as there was no strong smell and decomposition was almost non-existent.

"The males are always the more succulent of the two but this one was brought in several weeks ago, I would suggest the female for a tangier, more gamey taste," the Chef said.

"I don't know, do you have any other specials? I've about lost my nerve."

"Nonsense. It's never a good idea to meet your meal, but as they say where you're from, 'man up, boy'," the Chef said with a light chuckle.

"Alright, the girl then."

"Excellent, it is a very stripped-down almost elemental dish, so prep time is very minimal, if you would like to go wait in the kitchen I will cut a nice flank," the Chef said and motioned the bigger man outside.

He exited a few moments later carrying a plate with a small, dry steak placed gingerly next to a small scoop of Basmati rice. The Chef then selected a small pan from the shelf over the stove, oiled it and ignited one of the burners.

"The trick is to cook it enough to destroy the bacteria but not enough to destroy the flavor," the Chef explained as he tossed the steak in with a crackle. He then made some elaborate maneuvers, showing off to his audience of one. "I find minimal spice works best. Let the ingredients do all the heavy lifting, I say."

"You're the expert," the Texan said with a shrug.

After a few minutes of flame-broiling the Chef returned the cut to the dish and placed some chilled, pickled baby carrots on the side.

"Bon apatite," he said and slid the dish over to the Texan.

"Boy that looks great." The Texan could barely get the words out before stuffing a large piece in his mouth.

"I'm glad you enjoy it, it's not often I get to experiment by making a Zonbi Tar-Tar," the Chef said.

The Texan swallowed heavy on his last bite. "Wait, doesn't tar-tar mean…"

"Yes, it means lightly or not cooked at all," the Chef said "But doesn't it taste delicious? Besides, I'm always on the lookout for the freshest ingredients and as you saw I'm running a little low on male."

Round Five

The Atomizer 'V' Jayradikill

Winner: Jayradikill

Up on the Rooftop Click, Click, Click

By The Atomizer

The night was inky black and the snow came down in large puffy flakes, like the soap chips used in the church's annual Christmas pageant. Timmy sat on the edge of his bed staring out his second story bedroom window.

For the past three years Timmy O'Doyle had attempted to stay up to catch Santa in the act. After three years of failure to be awake the entire night he was beginning to grow weary. That morning he had pocketed a few of the chocolate covered espresso beans from his father's stocking and had begun to pop them into his mouth around midnight. The first time he chomped into one the bitter taste had resulted in Timmy wiping his tongue furiously on his *Star Wars* bedspread, but after a few more hours he had actually grown a taste for the beans.

At the family dinner this Thanksgiving, Timmy's cousin had insisted that there was no Santa Claus and that it was his parents that put his presents under the tree each year. This was a slanderous accusation that had landed the older boy a bloody nose after Timmy "accidentally" smashed him in the face with

the hard plastic end of a turkey baster. Timmy was 9 years old, and although he had had moments of doubt in the past, he firmly believed in Santa Claus and this year he was going to see him.

At around three in the morning, Timmy was buzzing with excitement. Like an athlete who had just "pushed past the wall", Timmy was now up much later than he had been in past years and feeling fine. He sat smiling to himself while playing his Game Boy and occasionally glancing out the window at his now snow filled cul-de-sac. He played his game with the volume all the way down, as to not wake his parents and so he could hear the pitter patter of eight tiny reindeer (nine including Rudolf, but he wasn't real, just something made up for a song).

Timmy was one of the luckiest kids he knew because unlike many of his friends Timmy had an actual chimney with an actual fireplace. Santa would not have to use the window, slide under the door, or whatever he did for kids with newer houses.

A half an hour later and the power of the beans was beginning to diminish. "Just a couple of more hours," Timmy whispered to himself. It was getting close to daytime and Santa had to make his delivery before then. His house was in North-east America and Timmy figured that he couldn't be *that* late in Santa's flight plan, there were still a bunch of Canadian kids who would need to get their presents too.

Suddenly he heard it. The sound his heart had been dreading for the last three years: the creak of his parent's bedroom door. *Maybe Mom or Dad is just going to the bathroom*, he wished. At the other end of the hallway he heard footsteps, along with whispers and stifled giggles from both his

parents.

He waited until they had both descended the stairs down into the living room before he allowed himself a quiet sob. His greatest fear had been realized: No Santa, not only that his Parents were liars.

He slammed the pillow over his ears, trying to cover up his cries of despair. He had so successfully covered his face that he had barely noticed the lights outside.

It was a neighborhood ordinance that families putting up Christmas lights could only use bland white ones, as not to encourage tacky displays. This made the alternating red and green lights shining through the window and lighting up Timmy's room all the more odd.

He pressed his face to the glass of the window. Santa was there! The lights were those on his sleigh! Timmy could barely contain his excitement, but screaming out in happiness could possibly ruin the whole thing, and get him in trouble with his parents. He didn't spend all year being good (that small mishap with the turkey baster and his cousin the exception) just to get a lump of coal on a technicality.

The sleigh must have been hovering for a moment, because it touched down with a surprisingly loud clatter. Timmy heard a quick hissing sound, like air being let out of a balloon. Did Santa outfit his sleigh with hydraulics? *Sign of the times*, Timmy thought and shook his head.

Downstairs his parents sounded just as surprised as he was when they heard the click clack of Santa's boots in the chimney. *Oh boy I hope he likes the extra helping of cookies, maybe he'll leave more, bigger presents.*

For a moment he sat puzzled as he heard another sound

that wasn't at all like he imagined it would be. He heard a second object working its way down the chimney. *Oh yeah, dummy, it's Santa's sack of goodies.*

The two objects were slowly squeezing down the chimney and by the sound of it they would be visible in mere seconds. Timmy quickly and quietly got out of bed and threw open his door, making sure not to let the knob hit the hallway wall.

He was at the top of the stairs when he heard his mother scream. Her scream was cut off by two quick flashes of green and red light.

He started running down the stairs, still not letting himself believe anything was wrong. *Why would Santa scare Mom?* Then he heard his father retch and yell.

"You bastards, why would you do that," his Dad asked.

Timmy heard his father's words as he fell down the last two steps and into the foyer. He ran into the room amid another set of flashes. Running with his hands flailing he slipped upon entering the living room. The hardwood floor was covered in some black ashy substance. He picked himself up and dusted himself off. There were small green and red fires burning in every corner of the room.

The festive colors thrown by the fires did nothing to assuage the horror Timmy was beholding. The white ash on the ground was in the shape of his mother, right down to her long pink and purple push-on nails and feathered hair.

His father was not completely evaporated. One of the two creatures standing in front of the chimney held his head in his hands. The beasts wore gold and silver metallic loincloths and their slick amphibian skin was a deep red with spots a

sickly green. The room began to swirl and Timmy's mind forced itself to black.

* * *

Urthak put out the fires on the tree and expanded his capture case to enclose it for further study on the ship. His co-pilot had taken a small red boot from over the fireplace and was in the process of trying it on before Urthak admonished him for fooling around. He opened up his case and began tossing in brightly wrapped boxes.

"We're here for study, not play," he told his partner with a series of clicks. Urthak lifted up a small dish with brightly colored pastries. He put it to his skeletal nose and made a snort of disgust, throwing the cookies across the room.

The creature's large eyes went from the cookies to the boy curled on the floor. He picked the child up by the scruff of his pajamas and placed him into the case.

His co-pilot made an inquisitive grunt, to which Urthak responded with a laugh and a single word: "Snack."

Christmas at the Coffin House

By Jayradikill

Six o'clock on Christmas morning, and the Coffins are still nestled deep in their beds; all except for one. Little Chris Coffin, a boy of just ten years, slowly slid his feet over each carpeted step of the staircase, fondling every baluster along the way. Though his neck urged leftward, toward the sunlit living

room, he hushed his excitement. But his mind knew, nonetheless. Images of the brightly tinseled pine tree, the sun-blanketed furniture, and, most importantly, the heap of presents waxed across his forehead. As he finally stretched from the bottom step, his tilting head elucidated each of his premonitions. Eyes widening, Chris strode into the open room. Once before the looming tree, he surveyed the multitude of boxes and bags that lined its base. Wetting his lips, he knelt and brought his eyes to each package. Yet, his eyebrows fell lower as he looked over each tag. Rummaging through the pile, he read in silence but mouthed the syllables, *Nicholas*, his father, *Carol*, his mother, *Frank*, his uncle. No matter how many times he looked, none held his name. He knew his parents loved him, but still he stood perplexed and aggravated. Maneuvering around the festively dressed coffee table, Chris flopped back onto the near couch, stomping the floorboards as he sat. He grabbed a tattered Santa hat from the table and positioned it atop his head.

"Good morning, son."

Chris's father's voice sent a jolt down his neck, redirecting his focus from the floor. "Morning, dad." Chris's eyes followed his father down the staircase. "Merry Christmas."

"Oh, you're up early." Chris's mother rang out from the stair, the remnants of a yawn still on her tongue.

"Yep." Chris brought a joyous inflection to his voice. "I just couldn't wait."

The father put his meaty palm to the armrest nearest his son, grinning gaily with watery eyes. The mother approached, swiping her arms around her husband's stately shoulders; she

too expressed the same teary gleefulness. Chris couldn't help but give in to a delighted smile.

"Can we open presents first?" He spoke with strained optimism, sitting forward with hands to his knees.

"Well…" Chris's mother began, lunging forward to catch her husband's eye.

"I don't see why not." Chris's father said as he made for the fireplace. Sitting down to his heels, he anxiously separated the metal gate and reached inside. He rotated his head back, allowing the full length of his arm into the opening. After he shakily regained his stance, the father approached his son, clutching a rectangular, papered box. At slightly less than a foot's length, the oblong box was strangled by a dusty black ribbon while the wrapping beneath boasted a piercing vermillion gloss.

"I didn't want to take any chances." The father spoke slyly, attending to the growing enthusiasm upon his son's face. "Couldn't have you opening this without us around." Mirroring his boy's lopsided smile, the father outstretched his arm, offering the gift from between stiffened fingers. Chris palmed the box and hastily brought it to his lap. He studied the paper for several seconds before making another movement. Pinching the bow between thumb and forefinger, he lifted his arm. The ribbon slithered along the packaging, taking with it a few scraps of red. After discarding the bow, Chris scored his eager fingernails over the paper until it gave way, ripping and crumpling beneath his hands, his gleeful excitement overtaken by hurried intent. With eyes fluttering over the thin cardboard, he pulled open the four interlocking flaps and peered into the shallow chasm.

To his astonishment, settled at the bottom was a lone, rusted butcher knife. The blackish handle, cracked with rusty bolts, lead into a straight tapered blade, the majority of its surface overrun with splotches of red and brown. Leveling his stare over the box, Chris noticed his broken reflection throughout the scarcity of silver sheen. Immediately, his fingers crawled into the opening and clasped around the weathered hilt. He brought the knife into the air.

"Do you know what this is?" The father whispered, leaning over the couch. Chris offered his gaze and an anticipatory silence. "This is my very first knife, my father gave it to me… and I thought it was time to continue the tradition. You are a little younger than I was at the time but I believe you are ready."

"I love it." Chris spoke through heavy breath and tearing eyes. Angling his tightening grip, he admired the blade from every possible viewpoint. Though old and beaten, he saw the knife as an implement of raw and sick beauty.

"Would you like to try it out?" The father stuck a firm palm to his son's shoulder. Finally breaking from the blade, Chris aligned his eyes with his dad's. Although he did not actually voice a reply, Chris knew his answer was well received. "Look in the closet." His father said before a heartening chuckle.

Collecting himself from the couch, Chris stepped methodically for the near closet, doing his best to dampen his overanxious feet. He stood with a hand to the circular metal indent and took in a trembling breath. As he slid the wood aside his ears and lips perked. Casting his eyes into the barely lit opening, Chris let out an impulsive, joyous squeal. Inside was a

dirty-blonde haired woman of about twenty-five years. Gagged by a generous wrapping of multicolored, stringed lights, she sat quivering atop a wooden chair, bound to it by her thinned arms and legs. She whimpered as if a wounded animal, throating cries of the highest pitch. Mouth agape with delight and disbelief, Chris relinquished his knife to his right hand, massaging the sweat from his left.

"Hi, what is your name?" Chris inflected through a nervous gulp.

"Now, son." The father interjected. "If you are going to ask her a question, you will have to remove her gag first. But I'd like you to keep it on for now, I wouldn't want you getting too attached."

"Yes, dad." Chris said, intoxicated by the moment. His eyes traveled over the twitching landscape of the woman's body, though many divergent feelings passed through his mind and over his skin, he could not identify a single one of them. He brought his moistened eyes to hers, nothing contrasted the two aside from the mascara bleeding down the woman's cheek. Again she attempted to scream, but the sound came only as a muffled belch. Chris brought the knife level with his shoulders, looking back to his parents.

"Go on, son." His father spoke soft encouragement.

Regaining the woman within his focus, Chris brought the blade back under his limp arm and approached his living, breathing gift.

"I know what you need." The boy clasped onto the loose material of his Santa hat, removing it from his scalp. He outstretched his arm and placed it over the woman's blonde curls, momentarily fighting the resistant bobbling of her head.

Chris again brought up his knife, this time between both palms, and huffed through his open mouth. “Merry Christmas.” He murmured as he forced down his arms with indefinable pleasure, his heart beating ruefully against his chest.

Round Six

Jayradikill 'V' Grim Squall

Winner: Jayradikill

Specters, Protectors

By Jayradikill

The light is dim inside the old funeral parlor. Not a single sound or movement, but, of course, that is to be expected. A wretchedly emaciated body lay supine on a chrome embalming table. As full body burial was recently outlawed – due to the peculiar epidemic of the deceased *returning* – the now archaic steel was used only as a convenient intermediary between body bag and cremation furnace. Yet, for reasons unknown, that night's neglectful attendant closed up without casting the final carcass into the fires; perhaps he thought, rather naively, that it would still be there by the break of morning. But, nevertheless, the naked corpse lay sprawled over the cold steel, its arms awkwardly crossed over its belly, its mouth lopsidedly agape. A milky film covered its steadfast eyes, presenting the irises as pale, the pupils as distant. But the white veil began to stir, as if tiny storm clouds over the greyish sclera; a surreal sign of life in the lifeless.

The crusted eyelids shuttered and scraped shut, trembling to remain exactly that. But abruptly the tormented wince

disengaged. As the thing's eyes flung wide, its torso arched upward, arms and legs quivering hard against the table to a frenzied metallic rhythm. Its back thrust down to the steel as it continued to writhe, jolting up to the right then up to the left. One last sickening convulsion tipped the table, sending the body to the checkered tiles below. The smack of brittle bone and paper-thin derma against the linoleum echoed throughout the room and connecting hallways. Though completely vacated of humanity, somewhere in the building, the sound was heard. The reanimated form quivered again upon the floor, its flesh in more perplexity than pain. Squirming and moaning with mounting violence, the thing began to crawl.

It reached the room's only exit, latching its skeletally thinned fingers to the doorway, and cried out again. Pressing its palms to the stern wood, it attempted to stand. Sliding first to a lethargic kneel, its hands climbed farther up the threshold. Frenetic popping and snapping resounded as the body exercised its dormant ligaments and stiffened cartilage. Finally stretching up to a stable stance, the thing bobbed as its frozen muscles readjusted, the reflexes returning, the flesh reborn. Looking rightward, it stared down to its shoulder through dead eyes. A section of sternum stuck up through torn tissue, an injury incurred through the recent fall. Struggling to restructure its mandible, the thing gawked, it cared not for the fresh wound but only allowed curiosity to run its course. With a swift retraction, it looked away and down the long hallway ahead. Its focus switching from floor to ceiling, wall to wall, the body began to walk, its feet shuffling slowly but urgently along the tile.

With each agonizing footfall, its chest lurched forward

and its neck undulated, again and again giving out under the weight of the gyratory head above. Although no thoughts swirled in its mind – nor did any memories come to the surface – its eyes explored and prodded at its surroundings. It had interest without idea and inquiry without identity. It moved as if a toddler and reasoned as if an animal. Altogether, it was utter inhumanity placed inside human skin. The thing's bones creaked and wobbled as it gained speed, staggering down the fluorescently lit hall. The legs, sickly and pale, did not move with aim or intent but just merely moved, testing the tendons therein.

"You there, weary traveler." A vaporous voice emanated from a nearby room. Trailing down the long hall, the ethereal utterance stopped the infantile automaton dead in its tracks. Turning its head, the thing peered into the nearest room.

"Yes, you," Again the voice called out, speaking through both inward and outward breath. "What brings you out of rest, O my rotting sojourner?" The words rang soft and innocuous.

The body only gazed into the darkened doorway, its features awash with an imbecilic curiosity.

"Though you do not speak, I know I have your attention." The mysterious being spoke now with slight agitation. "Please, O my cadaverous journeyman, grace me with your presence, follow these words."

The body lunged ahead without yet altering its stance, odious air seeping from between its greyed lips. The bony right foot edged ahead and waited until the left did the same, a decrepit game of follow the leader. The shuffle of tight flesh against hard linoleum sounded from the hall and ceased once through the doorway. The thing stood, its shoulders predatorily

hunched, and gazed into a pillar of smoke. It cocked its head as the smoke mutated into a gaseous mimicry of human form, its translucent extremities fading from elbow and knee down.

"There you are," The greenish phantom's jaw rippled. "So curious, so perplexing, why the body, once depleted of life, would decide to pretend as if it is undead."

The thing just stood, huffing and staring.

"Oh I know these words pass you by, so then I direct my voice to the creators themselves, whoever they may be. Why does this humble creature amble about? Unfinished business? The work of magic? Or simple boredom?"

Again, the body merely gawked into the phantom from eyes of nothingness.

"Do you see the objects around you?" The ghostly form swiped its translucence over the walls. Lined along a sturdy row of shelving were urns of differing sizes and elegances. The opposing wall housed a large furnace with heavy pipes snaking off in every direction. This was the crematorium.

"This is what should become of you," The phantom continued, knowing only its tone, not its words, mattered to the beast. "You are an anathema, a burden on society." The ghost noticed a shift in the body's attention, from the walls and through an adjacent window. "I see. You want to get out there, but I simply cannot, and will not, allow that to happen. You are chaos and destruction incarnate. And it is up to us to make sure you are reduced to ash."

Suddenly the steel covering on the retort creaked open, the handle steaming with finger-like vapor, and its mouth conflagrated. The beast's shoulders turned as it attended to the blaze. For the first time its head strained with wonderment as

well as fear. Its feet began toward the furnace, the movement more of a slide than pace, as if prodded along by many imperceptible hands. The thing's focus bobbed back to witness the accomplished grin across the specter's face, then forward to the rueful flames. An invisible thrust, more voracious than the others, guided the abomination's head and upper chest into the fire. Though it came to no description of the searing heat, the thing groaned and yelped as its skin bubbled, the nerves beneath lit like small fuses. The greenish phantom chuckled as it watched on, its ephemeral essence met with the stench of roasted flesh and charred bone; its eternal duty carried out.

Rush

By Grim Squall

"That's gotta be him," Jerry said, pointing a finger towards a dark corner of the bar.

Alice said nothing and followed behind as he worked his way around the tables and through the heavy smoke. A man, wearing a black trench coat and matching Gambler hat, sat alone in the booth. His left hand was unseen while the right rested on the table, fingers taking turns thumping against the wood. The skin was gray blue and peeling around the cuticles.

"You're late."

The voice was like grinding rocks.

"Yeah. Sorry. We had a little trouble finding the place."

"Sit down."

Jerry looked at Alice for a moment before volunteering himself to be the one closest to this thing in the booth.

"How longs she been in there?"

"In the house? I guess since Rush Week."

Alice nudged Jerry with her elbow.

"Uh, I mean two weeks ago. That's when the first pledge went missing."

"You see how big her fangs were?"

"Only time I ever saw em was right before I hauled my ass to the other side of town. But if memory serves me correctly, they were freaking huge!"

"She's old then," the man said.

"So how do we know you can get rid of her? So many other hunters have tried." Alice spoke up.

The man leaned his face into the light. What skin he had left hung loosely to his skull, surrounding a dark gash where his right eye should have been. He stared at her with his left and smiled, bearing a jagged cluster of rotting gums and teeth.

"I ain't got what they want."

The dead man pulled apart his trench coat, revealing multiple holes in his neck and shoulders. The flesh around the punctures was soft and wrinkly, like a prune. A similar color as well.

"But Lord knows they've tried."

"Can she kill you? I mean, er...."

"Only if she crushes the brain," he said, knocking against his hat with his knuckles.

"Okay. How much?" Jerry asked.

"We'll talk about that after the job is done."

"Kinda like a lawyer."

"Something like that. I'll kill that blood sucker or you don't owe me a thing."

"Sounds fair to me. Alice?"

She nodded.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"You can call me Griffin."

* * *

The frat house was another mile away and Jerry tried to focus on taking deep breaths from the open window while maintaining the speed limit. A policeman discovering a rancid zombie in the back seat would not only hold them up, but would also prolong the presence of the horrible stench. He glanced over at Alice. She also hung her head out of the passenger window, while casting the occasional glance at the back.

"Here it is," Jerry said.

There were no lights on. Even in the darkness, it seemed to be covered in a shadowy cloth. Someone could drive right by and never know it was there.

The perfect home for a vampire.

"The girl stays in the car," Griffin said. "You come with me."

"Why do I need to go in there?"

"Do you want her gone or what?"

Jerry huffed and exited the car. Griffin led the way and was surprisingly fast for a corpse as he hurdled the tall length of steps.

"Where's she been holin' up?"

"Lots of places. But mainly the attic."

"Figures."

Griffin kicked open the front door, sending a thunderous boom through the empty house. Jerry's insides jolted and froze as he clutched his chest. She would know they were here. He turned to the car. Alice stared up at him with a look that suggested she was afraid for him but thankful to be inside a fortress of American made steel. Turning back, Jerry followed Griffin inside.

"Show me," he said.

"This way. Up the stairs."

The wood creaked with every step and no matter how hard he tried, Jerry's breathing was too loud for his comfort. No sounds came from Griffin. He stopped at the top of the stairs and jerked his hand back, smacking it into Jerry.

He shivered at the feeling of cold, dead flesh against him.

"She's close."

"How do you know?"

The ceiling above them crashed down, sending huge pieces of debris on top of him. His skin ached and burned. The dust stung his eyes and he lost grip on his surroundings.

Something began to pull at his body and lift him from the rubble.

"Thanks, Griffin."

But when he opened his eyes there was no walking cadaver. Instead, a naked, blood-soaked woman held him high with her right arm. Her mouth opened, her fangs aching to pierce him.

A large metal keg swung from behind her and slammed into her back. Jerry flew from her grip and tumbled down the stairs. He lay on the floor, trying to ignore the pain and

remembering how the same exact keg had caused a similar accident in the spring.

"Come on, you bitch," Griffin yelled from above. The vampire hissed and there was a sudden rush of air and a pounding groan. Jerry rolled over to look up the stairway. A dark figure flew toward him. He covered his face with his arms but the shape landed just in front of him on the base of the stairs.

"Griffin...."

"She's a tough sucker."

The zombie moved to lift himself up but his left leg ripped from the socket as he tried. Groaning, he pulled himself across the floor toward Jerry.

"Gimme your finger."

"What? No!"

"Give me your damn finger!"

The zombie grabbed his wrist and bit down onto the knuckle of Jerry's left forefinger. The pain was blinding and churned his intestines as he screamed until his throat burned and gurgled with gobs of phlegm. His stomach heaved and he vomited onto the floor before screaming again.

"Brings back some memories, ay college boy?"

The zombie finished chewing off the meat of Jerry's finger and began crunching on the bone. Another loud hiss came from above. Griffin grabbed his fallen limb and jammed it back into place below his torso.

Leaping onto his feet, he broke off a piece of the banister and trudged up the stairs. Jerry stayed on the ground, wrapping a part of his shirt around the wound and moaning to himself. He lifted his head when he heard a wet stabbing sound,

followed by a screech of agony.

Another sloppy noise, followed by rhythmic footsteps brought Griffin to the top of the stairs. He held the vampire's head in the crook of his arm like a basketball. Punching his fist into the skull, he removed a hunk of brain and shoved it into his mouth.

"You son of a bitch… my finger!"

Griffin looked down on him as he swallowed the mash of brains.

"Let's just consider it a down payment."

Round Seven

Jayradikill 'V' Deacon of Doom

Winner: Jayradikill

The Beast and the Body in the Back-seat

By Jayradikill

"Scalpel…"

"It's over there. On the table."

"I say *scalpel*, as in, hand it to me, you imbecile."

"Oh, forgive me, sir, I'm still learning."

"Christ. You were *learning* a month ago. Now you're just obstructing."

Unsheathed hands over dormant flesh. Unclean steel through stiff tissue. Jellylike excretions of cloudy yellows and reflective reds. This night, evil has two names; you shall come to know them as Dr. S and Mr. B. By his own terms, Dr. S is a surgical genius, on a path far from mainstream medicine but right in line with fringe and anomaly. He carries out his practice from the mind and intent of shaman with the tools and commodities of the layman. He recently took Mr. B, a lowly drifter seeking guidance, under his blackened wing. Together, Mr. B and the good doctor have spilled an immeasurable amount of blood. They have crafted an uncountable collection of trinkets from bone and teeth, some for everyday purpose

such as kitchen utensils and decorative candle-holders, others solely as aesthetic bric-a-brac for the wall or tabletop.

"Hell." The doctor uttered, curling his hands up from the cadaver.

"What is it, sir?" Mr. B's eyes ran from the body to doctor and back again.

"All is lost," Dr. S began. "No matter. Tomorrow we will drain the blood and..." His words fell to the floor.

"And?" The assistant peered into his master's relegated features and grimaced, as if he saw nothing but a grotesque statue. The doctor's head tilted back slightly as his bottom lip jostled from the top. Though it appeared regurgitation was sure to follow, his mouth and the floorboards below remained clean.

It was never Dr. S' intention to serve as the devil's dirty right hand, yet it was never his choice, the beast within his chest does not appreciate insolence. Through Mr. B's eyes, the doctor works on fancy and whim, but, just as the novice, he merely lives to follow orders. If the beast requires a particular fleshy artefact, perhaps an ear or kidney, the doctor will rightly and swiftly appease. If the beast requests a spontaneous and unneeded surgery, the doctor will certainly satisfy, laying out his freshly sharpened tools without question or hesitation. Dr. S, the death-dealer, the drone, despised the thing that sat so innocuously just beneath his sternum. A feeling akin to not only the trepidation a delinquent boy has for his stern mother, but also the indefinable love and craving for the leather belt in her hands. So as to avoid harangue, Dr. S conceded to the beast's every want. Though, on this night, the good doctor thought its urge to be rather odd. He sent Mr. B out into the cold and rain. Usually Dr. S preferred to claim his own victims but opted

instead to ease his head of the day's wears. Moreover, this was finally Mr. B's chance to prove himself as anything other than an incompetent mouth-breather. Icy needles dripped from the abyss above, only amplifying the abhorrent cold. Luckily, the empathetic doctor allowed Mr. B use of his only vehicle, a dilapidated sedan, so as the blood would not freeze right within vein.

Secluded to his grim palace of skeletal remains and decaying flesh, the doctor waited. He seated himself at a small oaken table opposing a large window so he could survey the front yard and driveway. He gnawed through scraps leftover from the previous night's sacrifice, his tongue lapping entrails for the fluids, his teeth eroding bone for the marrow. Devoid of haste or expression, he brought blood and gristle to his lips using a makeshift spoon carved from a whitened mandible. Perched in the jittery light of a lantern made from the cap of a newly freed skull, the doctor gazed through the blemished glass, patiently masticating all the while. It was quite apparent that the beast in his chest sought sustenance of the visceral type. With every request the good doctor fulfilled, he could feel his body change. With every severed limb, every dislodged human fibre, he could sense the pain of protuberance emanating from his back, each drop of blood supplementing a pool of wicked ecstasy.

The exterior on the solitary domicile, alighted only by the doctor's dismal lantern, boasted crotchetiness and unease, a deep gloom that could cause the heavens to shutter. Not even an hour had passed since Mr. B took off into the night when he sped back into the driveway. The vehicle's tires crept slower and slower ahead, mounds of uneven gravel crackling under the

weight. Yet the doctor merely sat. He noticed the headlights ebb out but still he waited. Finally Mr. B entered, drenched by the rain and encased in malevolence. Though not a word was muttered between them, master followed apprentice, both filing from the structure to gather the night's prize.

Once outside, near the decrepit sedan, Mr. B jostled up the rear door's handle to reveal the lurid sight – a body in the back-seat. The doctor bent at his hip to observe. The quiescent man lay sprawled over fraying seat cushions, feet angled to the floor, head cocked side-ward. Most of the bluish flesh remained hidden under a plush black suit. Remarkably, neither the fabric nor the dermis showed definitive signs of struggle. And though the face lacked lively color, a calming serenity surmounted the air. Dr. S suddenly returned from his momentary trance.

"Good work," He muttered from a corner of his mouth. "This will appease tenfold."

Soon thereafter, the body was carried over shoulder into the structure. Ever so gently it was placed onto a crude operating table within an isolated back-room. This room was farthest from natural radiance and quite horrid overall. A piercing, greenish light illuminated the terrors throughout. The artificial light shown upon serrated tools, every one rusted and moist. It shown upon cylindrical containers lined along the tiled white wall, each more stained with anonymous fluids than the last. It also revealed the mammalian innards suspended from the ceiling by hooks and chains, the intervals dissimilar, the sways arrhythmic. Mr. B and the doctor stood adjacent to one another over the body. The mesmerized assistant acquired the bone-saw from a nearby table at his master's request. The doctor quickly arrested his intention and seized the implement,

as if a fretful mother removing the dangerous device from her child's hands. "You have done good work, Mr. B, but I will take care of the rest from here." The doctor glared off, but to nothing in particular. He massaged the flat of the saw over the back of his hand.

"Shall I prepare the body for incision?" Mr. B inquired, cautious at each syllable.

"That will not be necessarily." Still the doctor absent-mindedly caressed the steel.

"Well," Puzzled, the apprentice went on "Is there anything you'd like me to do?"

"My beast requires the final scrap to be fulfilled, a sinner's heart, and today that scrap is you, Mr. B."

As the last word left the good doctor's lips he raised the blade and veered a ghastly slash into the left side of Mr. B's neck. The wound, spouting red and fatal in its own right, was soon accented by continuous hacks to the lower neck and chest area. Mr. B's lacerated carcass collapsed to the ground. The good doctor reached into Mr. B's chest cavity, flicking aside shards of bone, and pulled the heart from within, ripping the remaining sinuous obstructions with one last tug.

He stood, revelling above the chaos with the glistening organ in one hand and the crimson spattered blade in the other.

"There is one thing I'd like you to do, Mr. B," The doctor stretched through his neck and back, directing his malignant speech to the eviscerated assistant. "Know that you left this world with your honor intact. You certainly did not perish without purpose. I bestow upon you my utmost respect because of your service on this day. This is my word, I shall tear down any maligner of your name, any detractor or falsifier who so

wishes to pass ill judgment over your intentions; I will gut them all." Dr. S inhaled tentatively but deeply. "I hold your heart in my hand. It is warm and for the first time so is mine. The beast is finally satisfied. I am finally free."

Never Alone, Never Again

By Deacon of Doom

Jonathan sits in his dimly lit bedroom as the multi-colored lights flicker outside his window wondering where he had gone wrong. It wasn't too long ago that he lived the perfect life. He had a nice little house in the middle of town, a loving wife and two children. His job was going well; as a matter of fact he was up for a promotion.

But all that changed in an instant. A drunk driver had taken the lives of his beautiful wife and their darling children, leaving him alone, afraid and very angry at the world. His downward spiral into depression had cost him his job, which in turn cost him his house and most of his worldly possessions.

As all of the things in life he used to cherish were subtracted one by one his need for vengeance and revenge grew exponentially. All the love and caring in his heart was replaced by hatred and loathing. It was only a matter of time before his anger and hostility reared its ugly head forcing him to live out all his deepest, darkest desires.

It all started innocently enough though. Since his first career path didn't quite work out like he had imagined Jonathan decided to move to the old family cabin on the outskirts of town and take up taxidermy as a means to support himself.

For the most part the new career kept him pretty busy, but he still had loads of free time. And he spent that time reminiscing about his wife and children as he drowned his sorrows in a bottle of cheap whiskey. The pain that he felt had grown to a fevered pitch. He even began to question his own existence. Why would someone take the lives of his wife and children and leave him here all alone? On several occasions he even attempted to take his own life but at the last minute couldn't go through with it.

Jonathan had given up all hope that he would ever find someone as caring and beautiful as his beloved wife. He finally had embraced the fact that he would probably die alone and no one would even know he was gone. Then one day all of that changed, a young woman had come into his shop carrying a large burlap sack. The one thing Jonathan noticed right off the bat was that the woman looked eerily similar to his deceased wife. The second thing he noticed was the absence of a wedding band on her finger.

"Hi, do you work here?" she politely asked.

"Well, uh…Yes ma'am I do. Not only that I own the place." He giddily replied.

The woman placed the burlap sack on the counter and spoke softly with a tear in her eye "I don't even know if you do anything like this but…" She trailed off.

Sensing that something was amiss Jonathan reached out and grasped the ladies hand "Go on honey, tell me what you need".

The woman fought back the tears enough to tell Jonathan that inside the bag was her pet dog, Rufus. She had accidentally backed over him and since she had owned him since she was a

little girl she wanted to know if Jonathan could stuff the dog and mount it so they would always be together.

Normally Jonathan dealt mostly with deer, moose, elk, and occasionally a few ducks and pheasants but there was no way he could turn down a face like that.

As she opened up the burlap sack so Jonathan could get a good look at what he was dealing with he told her that he would try his best but he couldn't make any guarantees that the dog would be exactly like she remembered because he would have to restructure the entire facial area because it had taken the brunt of the damage.

The woman agreed and left the dog so Jonathan could work his magic. It took a full 2 weeks to get the job done but once he was finished he was sure this was his finest work to date. And when the woman arrived to pick her beloved family pet she wholeheartedly agreed.

This gave Jonathan a new lease on life, finally he was able to do something that brought someone great joy and happiness. But the moment was bitter-sweet. He had provided someone with the one thing he knew he could never have, true happiness. Because all he had held near and dear to his heart had been taken away from him.

But that was about to change, seeing this young woman that reminded him of his lovely wife had given him a new lease on life. He would do his best to ensure that he would never be alone again. As the woman left he looked down at the check that she paid with that listed all her vital information.

Later that night armed with the woman's address and a sharp butcher knife he set his plan into motion. He waited patiently outside her house tucked safely in the bed of his pick-

up until she arrived home. Acting quickly he jumped from the pick-up and ran up to her, placing the razor sharp knife precariously close to her jugular vein.

"If you want to live, don't scream and do exactly as I say" He whispered in her ear as he secured her hands in front of her body with a zip tie.

The woman did exactly as she was told and got into the vehicle with Jonathan. She didn't immediately recognize him but as they drove further and further from town she finally spoke.

"You're that taxidermy guy right?" she said in hushed tones.

Jonathan didn't speak; instead he put the tip of the blade closer to her and gave a quick jab to her side. The woman flinched as the blade lightly pierced her skin; she knew it would be best to keep quiet from now on.

As they arrived at Jonathan's house he pulled her in close to him and kissed her lightly on the head. The woman's first reaction was to pull away but she knew this would more than likely anger her kidnapper so she remained still.

She didn't say a word when he pulled her from the car and led her to a little wood shack out behind the main cabin. She remained quiet when he placed her on the rusty white table then strapped her down. A solitary tear ran down her cheek as he tilted the table and placed a piece of tape over her mouth.

As she looked around the room she began to wiggle and squirm a bit, but it was already too late. When Jonathan picked up a large knife and began to slice down the center of her body she began kicking and screaming as best she could. Jonathan merely sat on the stool and watched as the life slowly drained

from her body.

Once the last trickle of blood left her body Jonathan began his work. He removed all her internal organs, fitted her with some of his wife's old clothes then mounted her on a pedestal. After all that's what we're told to do anyway right? When you love someone you put them on a pedestal and worship them with all your heart.

Which brings us to where we are now, as Jonathan sits in his chair rocking back and forth pensively staring at the 15 or 20 female cadavers that have been mounted, stuffed and arranged in various places around his bedroom. The still flickering lights from the neon sign outside that reads "Jon's Taxidermy: You Kill Em, We Fill Em" flashes brightly.

He looks to the heavens with a solemn look on his face and cries out "You may have taken my wife and my children but now I will never be alone, never again."

Round Eight

Jayradikill 'V' Brundle

Winner: Jayradikill

Consume the Moon

By Jayradikill

Mick sat atop a large boulder before the setting sun. He had been there for well over five hours, unable to move, unable to comprehend what had happened. He felt trapped, not only by the heavy forest behind and magnanimous drop-off ahead, but also by the unforeseen treachery by his community, by his family. He sat upright over the sharply eroded rock-face, scarred knees to his chin, each hand forming an unbreakable grip onto the opposing forearm. Though his snakelike neck bent far from his splayed shoulder blades, he kept eyes affixed on the blushing skyline.

Why did they do this to me? How could they? I've never done anything bad in my life, certainly nothing that would cause this banishment, this hell. The way they looked at me… the way they yelled… like I was a monster.

He felt the unforgiving cold against his skin but did not shiver, the rage was there to keep him warm. The wind

whipped as the sky began to blue and darken. But still Mick sat perched on the rock with no intention to move. Suddenly a jolt crawled up his spine, as if a large bug or rodent was frantically trying to reach the back of his neck.

What the hell was that?

Then his spine bucked back, forcing his torso into a sick concave shape. Though startled, he maintained the grip around his still unshaken knees. He felt every segment of his vertebrae wriggle and expand from the bottom up. He heard ligaments crackle and cartilage pop. The noise attacked his eardrums from the outside as well as in, a devil's rhythm that resonated from every bone in his body; clinching his teeth was all he could do to suppress the sadistic din. Barely able to tolerate the pain, he let out a sound somewhere between a whimper and a grunt but held his posture.

What is happening to me? Is this what death feels like? Maybe this is why they brought me out here, to die of some disease they themselves did not want to contract. But if that were true, why wouldn't they answer me…why wouldn't they tell me what was going on?

As the entity that tormented his spine reached the apex it slowed and finally stopped and Mick was met by silence once again. But along with the torturous sound went the agony, as if it was all a dream. Testing his upper back and shoulders, Mick noticed the extent of his recent change with each gyration.

This doesn't make any sense. This is certainly a ridiculous growth spurt if that's what it is. How could they know this before I did? Why not try to help me rather than shun me away?

Mick felt the uncontrollable urge to cry but found he had no tears to offer. Every subtle emotion that happened to cross his psyche only transmogrified into fury and ire. His internal words were his lone attempts at sanity.

I'm human. I'm still human. I am human. I am still just a human being.

By now the only light came as short stares of tiny luminescent eyes through the thick, black clouds. Mick did not look back. The last thing he wanted was more eyes watching him, more eyes judging him. So as he sat, his tired abdomen and newly altered back muscles rose as if under respiration but never seemed to fall. His breath was no longer under his control, but, without even being able to comprehend it, he began to enjoy the feeling, a relaxedness but also a readiness.

I am human… at least I still look like one.

His left arm shot up, finally shattering the strong vice around his knees. He looked on in subdued astonishment as it quivered and strained, holding its position in the air is if part of some grim marionette. The fingers splayed and contracted, growing in length as well as girth with each painful pulsation. His skin greyed and cracked as sharp hair – which resembled large, curved needles – sprouted from every crevice and fissure.

I can see why they didn't want me around. My fingernails could probably cut through a car if I wasn't paying attention.

A curious squirrel, not a bit startled by the commotion of mutating muscle and stretching skin, ambled onto the rock near Mick's feet. The little creature cared not even in the slightest for Mick's peculiar metamorphosis, it only prodded around the rocky surface, occasionally shaking the curl from its tail.

Go away little thing. I don't want to hurt you. You don't

know what's happening… in fact, I don't know what's...

Before Mick put a finish to his thought, his grotesquely postured hand arched down for the unsuspecting squirrel. It squeaked out a miniscule exclamation of fright. He brought the squiggling critter to his breast with a covetous angle to his wrist and fingers. The little life scratched and bombarded at Mick's chest, but that too had grown as tough and leathery as his hands. He only felt the struggle as futile strikes and ever weakening prods. His right hand, which boasted the final stages of the *change*, crept toward his left, the fidgeting digits easily engulfing the creature's head and neck.

Oh my god… don't do it… I can't look.

Mick assigned his eyes to the smoke-filled heavens. He felt his arms jolt and relax several times in succession, as if teasing the little squirrel.

Just do it. If you're going to do it… just get it over with.

He heard the disconcerting snap only as reverberation off of nearby trees; they knew what he had done, and they gave stern voice to their displeasure. The little body ceased to whip and strain. Without looking down, Mick retracted his trembling lips. His expression fell into a grimace with tinges of understated rapture. Drawing his tongue into the air, he noticed the new growth of his teeth. They were suddenly as sharp as razors and long enough to push his jaw fully ajar. Focus still to the darkened sky, his head sank ashamedly into his shoulders. He was hungry and his new teeth were eager. Before even consulting his muscling arms, the squirrel's soft head found way into his gaping jowl. Mick crushed the feeble skull and removed the meaty appendage with a single effort of mastication. He chomped and chewed reluctantly at first but

soon began to enjoy the taste.

I've never eaten blood before… it's good. Bone is too.

Swallowing the last slimy morsel, Mick jumped to his feet but quickly dropped to all fours. His body undulated as he prowled atop the boulder, each muscle stretching and falling into place, every bone creaking in disharmony. His sister's face shifted over his psyche, four deep slashes through her howling features. He then saw his parent's decapitated heads as translucent and terrified effigies, mom's seated atop dad's, dripping red down his features.

I am not human. I see the trees as tall infernos, every bough a burning torch, every leaf a glowing ember. I now understand why they have tossed me aside, but for it they must pay. It is difficult to imagine any person I've known without their stomachs eviscerated, without every one of their joints bent back. I am not human. I will sink my teeth into the moon and swallow its luminescence. I will dig my claws into those who have abandoned me and bleed them all individually over the sun. I will suffocate the landscape within a blotchy crimson veil.

Mick leapt from the rock and at once tore into the nearby covering of trees.

I am not human, and soon everyone will come to know it.

Assplode

By Brundle

Tim Abbink clinches his ass-cheeks as he kicks in the door of Station 26's public restroom. He has been struggling to keep

his bowels from moving since Station 19. He furiously paws at his button fly and loosens his pants just enough to get the waistband down around his knees.

He takes the throne. His body begins to convulse and spasm as what seems like the entire universe exits through his rectum at the same high speed as the passing monorails outside the door.

After a minute or so, his grip loosens from around the handicap bar - his knuckles now returning to their normal flesh-tone.

His stomach churns. The worst is over, but he is far from finished.

He looks around the room. The room is surprisingly clean for a high-traffic public shitter, but everything is wet - the floors, the walls, the sink - everything. Wet.

He looks down in the waste basket and sees a magazine has been dumped inside. He reaches over and tears a few squares of toilet paper off of the roll and picks the magazine up from out of the trash, using the TP as a protective sheath.

The cover of the magazine reads, “Gore! Gore! Gore! - Werewolf Edition.”

“Ha, werewolves…” he says, resting the magazine on his lap; turning the pages with his TP'd fingers. The pages inside are fully illustrated with pictures of dark skies, bright full moons, and giant, muscular wolf-men.

Tim continues flipping through the pages until something finally catches his eye. In bright red lettering, the words, “The Wolfman of Cratchett Manor” are scratched across a three page fold-out. The words bleed down the pages like open wounds.

He begins to read:

We had just made love not an hour before… before the change. She was asleep; her naked body sprawled across the bed, bathed in the blue moonlight shining in through the window. She was beautiful. An angel fallen to the Earth from the heavens above, I am sure of it. I am a devil - no better than Beelzebub himself - for taking such an innocent life.

Biting his lower lip, Tim reads on:

I couldn't sleep, so I walked to the window and peered out at the moon - so bright and full. I put my hand on the glass. It was cold. It was then that I first felt it - a painful burning sensation across my skin. It was as if the moonbeam was twenty times more stronger than the rays of the noonday sun! Suddenly, my bones began to shift and grow - my tight skin struggled to stretch around the chaos - splitting in several places. I tried to scream, but the sound that left my throat was not human - no, it was something feral… something evil.

Tim lowers his hand from the steel bar to turn the page, accidentally dropping the toilet paper roll onto the wet floor.

"Shit!"

The roll skitters across the floor. The paper unrolls and, in an instant, disappears from sight as it absorbs the room's perspiration. He looks around the room for another roll… paper towels… anything - finding nothing.

He continues to read:

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the window before me. Such a hideous beast I had become! I was enraged at the sight of it! I put my fist through the window, shattering it into a million little pieces. That is when I heard her scream…

Tim tightens his grip on the page:

I turned around to face her. I wanted more than anything

to warn her, to tell her to run, but I was more beast than man and the beast in me wanted to eat her pretty flesh right off of her beautiful white bones.

She leapt from the bed and grabbed the lamp on the bedside table - it was the first object she could find.

Screaming. Screaming. She just kept screaming.

I flexed every muscle in my upper body and howled. I had never felt more powerful in all my life. That is when I... I pounced. I pinned her helpless body to the floor - she couldn't move. I pushed my nose against her throat and sniffed. I could smell our sex on her skin. I could taste it with my tong--

Tim ripped the page from the magazine, folded it, and wiped his ass with it. "Ha, werewolves… what a tired fucking subject to write about."

He tossed the magazine back in the waste basket, flushed the toilet, and went about the rest of his day, not wasting another thought.

Round Nine

Jayradikill 'V' Lightbringer

Winner: Jayradikill

Ripe Fruit

By Jayradikill

What is it that brings city dwelling – city bred – Americans out to the rural countryside? What is it about the monotonous, sprawling landscape that entices fast-paced urbanites and suburbanites, who, for their entire lives, are fed on steel and concrete? For some, of course, it *is* the rural surroundings. The very idea that livestock greatly outnumbers human population grabs hold of their psyches and masturbates their dearest fantasies. For others, it is the untouched, natural beauty – the quiescent atmosphere, the virginal kingdom of flora and fauna. But for Rick Carner, it – the reason for leaving behind his upscale apartment complex and mile-a-minute lifestyle – was an irrefutable job opportunity, an opportunity called *promotion* from his boss's lips but a *demotion* from his wife's. Debra absolutely loathed the idea of living among the 'unwashed scroungers' and 'family fuckers,' as she constantly, but daintily, put it.

"I had no other choice in the matter." Rick opined from the driver's seat, his nervous breath snuffing any preconceived

attempt at persuasion. He looked to the passenger's seat – to his solemn, unwavering wife – but soon brought his eyes back to the rushing asphalt. Debra only stared out from the passenger-side window, arms rigidly folded at her belly. She hated the trees as they grew exponentially larger, the forest heavier, with every mile. The greys, chromes, and neon lights of the city had long since given way to greens, browns, and piercing bucolic outstretches of the purplish sun. Rick's wife just sat with tacit hatred in a tantrum-like slump.

"Are we even close?" She spoke toward the respiration-fogged window. Her voice came rasped, as these were the first words she offered Rick in hours. Tilting at her stiffened neck, she coughed throatily. Her efforts dislodged a modicum of phlegm which slid down her tongue. She cradled it within the parched walls of her mouth until sternly forcing it back down her gullet.

Rick cringed slightly.

"Should be just about there." He blinked in quick succession. "Maybe fifteen… twenty minutes."

Debra scoffed at her husband's uneasy words. Rick only tightened his grip on the steering wheel, knowing full well that they were forty minutes away at the very least.

* * *

The dusty tires on Rick's black sedan began to slow. He manipulated the exhausted vehicle rightward into the forest-flanked gravel driveway. The rubber struggled to keep its foothold over the fluctuating rock and foliage. Rick felt as though he was a cautious but determined boatman on rough,

rocky seas. But finally he navigated through the gravel and overhanging brush to his – or rather, their – new home. Killing the engine, Rick looked to his wife with sentimental eyes. To his surprise, and somewhat to his annoyance, Debra had fallen asleep against the passenger door, her vibrantly embroidered coat folded between her cheek and the window. Rick, with his hands still elevated in the cliché mark of '*we're here!*' scowled down at his ungrateful companion. Though optimistic throughout the entire drive, he was immediately drained of all enthusiasm. Turning his focus back to the house, he offered the '*we're here'* quietly to himself.

Doing his best not to disturb his less than appreciative passenger, Rick unlatched the driver's side door, stepped out, and gingerly pressed it back into place. He didn't feel like dealing with Debra's uncalled-for attitude and childish demeanor; to him, her impromptu slumber brought on a well needed break. He took the fact that she was a heavy sleeper as the silver lining to their clouded relationship.

The house was an ample rustic masterpiece, one story and cabin-like replete with lived-in charm and championed by lush vegetation. The handmade metal wind chimes and folksy adornments along the covered porch clanged gently in the wind. Rick slowed his pace to take in the sound. Yet as he neared the front steps, he noticed something that sickened and bewildered him – an expansive splatter of red both deep in hue and chunky in appearance. Rick's palm took his face as his legs were enlivened toward the sticky mess. He stopped at the porch steps and surveyed the unnerving scene. Splashes of crimson dripped down the wall, windows, and front door. It pooled sporadically on the wooden panels of the porch, seeping

through the many cracks in the boards. Rick's limbs wanted to panic but he kept them still. His throat prepared a scream but he choked it down. He only stood, enduring the machinelike rising and falling of his chest.

As the shock waned, Rick leaned in, maintaining his stance just off the porch. His nostrils spurred. There was a peculiar and saccharine scent about the air. He focused on a collection of tiny, squished, red bodies near several mangled pieces of green cardboard. As he reached a curious finger to the glistening pile, a voice startled him from behind.

"Hello, neighbor." An elderly man interjected. Rick turned quickly.

"Oh… hello… my name is…"

"Oh dear lord." The man cut in. "Look what they've done to your house."

"Who?" Rick perked his brow. "Who did this?"

The man quickly discerned the anxiousness on Rick's voice.

"Oh, I laid out some fresh raspberries on your porch there… see I grow 'em over at my place," the man indicated to his property with a firm thumb. "I knew some new folks were movin' in here so I thought I'd leave you a nice house-warming gift." He paused and looked to the dirt. "But it looks like the raccoons have already gotten to it. God damn'it, I should have known better, I'm really sorry."

"Oh, no worries." Rick breathed in and held the sweet air. "I thought it was… much worse… ah never mind."

"Well, here, I'll help ya clean this up. It is my fault after all." The man put a hand to his protruding gut. "My name is Oscar, by the way." He took the hand from his belly and held it

out to Rick.

“Oh yeah, I’m Rick… Rick Carner.” He said, shaking the man’s hand with eyes still to the vermillion spatter. “They do smell good though, I hope you have more.” Rick let out a quick, nervous laugh.

“Oh, tons!” Oscar boasted. “Yeah, I’m just happy to get rid of ‘em. See I sell them by the roadside not too awful far from here. I eat so many a’ those damn things I swear you could taste it on my skin.” He glanced around. “I’ll go ‘round back and grab the hose.” He paused again, looking to Rick’s car and the docile beauty inside. “That your wife?”

“Yes.” Rick bit his lip. “She fell asleep on the way here… figured I’d let her rest.”

“Hmm.” Oscar chortled, making his way around the house. “Pretty little thing.”

Rick drove down the barren road back to the new house, his car the only to be seen. His first day at his new job was over and he was in a surprisingly upbeat mood. The speed limit sign read *50*, but instead he cruised at a steady thirty-five miles per hour. He was in no hurry. He smiled at the fact that, just the day before, he and Oscar washed off the porch before Debra woke. He hoped that settling and refurbishing the house would ameliorate her standoffishness. Rick passed by a deserted, slanted wooden table on the side of the highway and immediately determined it as Oscar’s raspberry stand. *Must not be open today*, Rick thought.

He rolled into the driveway, now more confident with trolling over the uneven gravel. He parked the car, stepped out, and made for the front steps. Rick’s feet halted abruptly as his eyes found it – another glistening, red mess over the porch and

conjoining wall. The wetted door sat welcomingly ajar. Rick's brow descended.

"Again, Oscar?" His sighing words were crushed by the wind. Yet as he approached, the scene became eerily dissimilar from the day before. The scarlet splotches were thicker and spanned almost the entire porch's length. The air smelt sickeningly of iron and rotting meat, certainly not of sugar or fruit (or anything appetizing for that matter). Rick's lungs bobbed anxiously.

Without much thought or intension, he leapt onto the stained, rickety panels and breached the dribbling doorway. There on the floor of the kitchen, within eyeshot from the vestibule, sat Rick's wife Debra. Cross-legged, she hunched down predatorily over a ragged, bloody heap. Rick eyed the warm red trail from the porch, through the living room, and onto Debra's pastel blouse. Tangled sinews and pebbles of blood fell from her mouth to the tiles below. Rick froze. His wide eyes spoke the disheartened exclamations that his trembling tongue could not. Debra – filthy with blood and torn innards – looked up to her panic-stricken husband. Her features struggled between wonderment and sorrow, her lips giving in to intermittent fits of laughter. She let out a nasally grunt as if weary of her ability to speak.

"He…" Debra cried out. "He tasted like fresh raspberries." Her words grew softer.

Then, as she caught Rick's stare, she yelped at a klaxon's pitch and collapsed back to the damp, kitchen floor.

The Clowns Came Home to Roost

By Lightbringer

“God dammit,” Jeremiah drawled as he came up to his front porch. The sweet-rotten stench of freshly mauled flesh was thick in the evening air, and sure enough there was blood again--smearing the porch, the step, even the god damned front door. He could make out a few garbled, nigh-satanic nursery-rhymes scrawled in it like oddly-coagulated finger-paint. Those fucking clowns. He could just make out their voices, too: titterings and gibberings that teased at the consciousness, tried to prise it--

Jeremiah swore again, the sweat of a hard day's work turning cold with the resignation that it hadn't been enough. “Cecil! God dammit, get your dumb and blind ass down here. Cecil!” Jeremiah'd just done disposing of two teenagers, bright young things on their way to dreamland out west--called it resisting arrest, painted them as some joy-riding clock-freaks that had left May a crippled widow. His excuses were stretching the credulity of even the good people of Ashtonville. And the clowns were just ramping up.

They were really getting agitated, riled, not like he'd seen them in a long time. It might be time to move again, but he was getting old, and Cecil--”God dammit, Cecil, get down here and 'splain me something on how you let the clowns out your sight again! Can't have none of this letting them out of the attic, don't matter how they wheedle, y' hear!” The air shifted down the back of his shirt, sending shivers down his arms and around his chest. “Don't matter what they say…”

He put his hand to the frame of the door, above the blood, and tried to feel for Cecil. If nothing else, he should have heard him cowering in a corner somewhere, crying to his poor old ma'am. That's how he usually wound up when they found their way past his charms. Sometimes he'd have a knife in his hands; sometimes he'd be carving just a little piece off the inside of his thigh, nibbling at it, gibbering in a voice somehow at counterpoint to theirs.

Cecil hadn't ever been right, but what they did to his ma'am--well, that was that. Him and Jeremiah'd been together since, anyway; and Cecil had the knack for keeping them at bay, most times. When he didn't forget. The hard part was Cecil wanted to forget. Of course he did. His ma'am was one of them now, and maybe always had been. Couldn't be separated--oh no, they'd tried.

Moved three states away to a little six-pack of apartments--no by-your-leave, no forwarding address, and no God damned attic for the clowns. The things they did to attics, it was worse than what those crazy cat-ladies let their prides get off with. Jeremiah and Cecil, they thought they'd lost them. Felt a little guilty, maybe, because the clowns would only get worse away from Cecil's spells, but they were thinking maybe the clowns could be someone else's responsibility. The government or something. Hell, Jeremiah'd paid taxes twice, even: had to be good for something. And they were pretty sure Cecil should be on something like Social Security. So good riddance, excepting Cecil really did have odd feelings for his ma'am, still.

Didn't matter--the clowns had found them. That was the worst he'd ever seen them, too. Came in skin-riding fourteen cholos in two beat-up Dodge Chargers. He couldn't laugh for

want of crying; couldn't cry for want of laughing. One apartment had been empty, one'd just been squatters who knew how to get out in a hurry, but they'd feasted on the other three: one old couple with their grandchildren, a pair of frat boys, and a young woman who worked in a diner down the way.

Somehow the rest of town just avoided the place, like it had always been derelict, like nobody had ever lived there. There'd be flowers left, like at a horrible accident, and he supposed that's what it was. The clowns were a force of nature, bent not just minds but reality itself. Two weeks later the derelict six-pack apartments had an attic, a little clown warren nestled between each floor.

Jeremiah took a deep breath, and opened the door. He prepared himself for the worst, for Cecil's corpse awash in buzzer-burns, claw-and-tooth rends. There was blood, a lot of blood, more blood inside than out.

Cecil looked up from the ravaged corpse of his mother, grinning beatifically. A chunk of her liver in one hand, and something greenish Jeremiah couldn't identify in the other, he signed sloppily: she came back, Jer'. She came back.

Cecil smeared the green around his eyes, around his lips, and down his chin like a death mask, then dropped it and reached in deeper, pulling out a piece of chalk--Jeremiah wanted to believe it was chalk, or an oil stick--from God knew where.

Jeremiah surveyed the bungalow--half a dozen other clowns dead, as well, and a few just still and whimpering, though he couldn't see if that was shock or wounds. They'd amped him up too much, maybe. Or he'd been waiting to snap. But that was it--Cecil was the power now. Jeremiah sighed,

and sat down; bit his lip, and reached in deep to Cecil's old maw. Couldn't be any worse of a circus than he'd been living, he figured. He was getting too old.

Round Ten

Jayradikill 'V' The Bleeding Pen

Winner: The Bleeding Pen

Note: *The Bleeding Pen had to back out of the next round and as Jayradikill had already been eliminated, we brought forward the next two contenders for the duel.*

I Told You

By Jayradikill

"How much farther?

"It's right up ahead, just through these trees."

Every town has its share of mystery, intrigue, and even conspiracy. Some may spin fanciful tales about indestructible serial killers who, on those especially dark and frightful nights, will abscond from the shadows to spill even more adolescent blood. Some may boast of riches buried somewhere beneath the city's streets, an undeniable excuse for teenagers to play treasure hunter. For Rotter, however, it – the base of debate and folklore – is a lone gravestone located out in the middle of Rotter's dense and deceivable woods.

"Would you hurry your ass up!?"

"Just a second, dude. My shoelace got caught in a pricker bush."

"Of course."

The gravestone, deemed Tiresias, is an item of wonderment and conversation right alongside the Loch Ness monster and Sasquatch – a household name with minimal credibility but infinite mythos. Those who have seen it (and claim to have experienced its *otherworldly power*) are taken as seriously as Elvis sightings or Chupacabra droppings. To inquire the average citizen of Rotter as to the actual location of Tiresias is a swim upstream; but don't let that discourage you from picking up your very own *Sias Stone* hat or t-shirt from the gift shop down town.

"It's supposed to be right here." Shelley complained, stamping her foot in the crunchy foliage below. She lowered the book clamped between her straining fingers, *Tiresias: Spirits and Secrets*, a conspiracy theorist's field guide to every possible facet of Rotter's only claim to fame. "Shit." She raged, the syllable smuggled on a shaky out-breath. The tattered book was held firmly between her thumb and middle finger, her intrusive forefinger stuck between pages 120 and 121. Alex felt no need to console his frustrated companion. He only sidled over to this tree or that bush – anything to make himself look busy and, more importantly, to pretend as if he hadn't caught a word of Shelley's rant.

They continued on nonetheless, moving together as a far-reaching amoeba, never close enough to talk comfortably but never far enough to lose one another. The next few minutes came stricken with silence, as silent as clumsy teenage feet can

be, navigating over dried twigs and even drier leaves.

"This is going to be the best moment of our lives." Shelley suddenly opined, her voice completely devoid of its earlier somberness. "Ya know… if we find it." She forced back a thick net of pliable branches and conjoining spiders' webs.

"So what does this thing look like?" Alex offered the question without truly caring for the answer.

"Well." Shelley again brought her trusty book to focus and thumbed rapidly over a few pages. "Hmm, let's see, it says 'the Tiresais gravestone is 2.7 feet width wise and 3.5 feet lengthwise, made from a dark marble with a…" She stopped abruptly and squinted, bullying the book close between her palms. "Ya know what? it looks like a god damn tombstone out in the middle of the woods."

Alex chortled lightly, solitarily reveling in his friend's noticeable displeasure.

"I know," He said dumbly. "I just wanted to see if you'd consult your little friend there."

Shelley stewed in her loathsome attitude, more so irked by the fact she took Alex's usual aloof denigration so personally. Though she then attempted a humble smile, she only succeeded in displaying the perpetual bad taste in her mouth.

"Okay, okay," Alex said consolingly, prying back the nearest covering of flora. "So does this thing have any writing on it?"

"What?" Shelley barked, struggling with her own tangle of shrubbery. "Of course not, that's the whole point, it's a divining stone…haven't you been listening to anything I've…"

Alex quickly interjected.

"Well in that case, I think I found it." He stood with arm outstretched to the weighty branch above.

"What? Lemme see!" Shelley ran to her friend's side. "Holy shit." She broke through Alex's makeshift entranceway and into the clearing ahead. Alex laggardly followed.

There it was, the *Sias Stone* in all its corporeal glory. Though it only stood at about four feet from the ground, it appeared as if it was an ancient, otherworldly obelisk in Shelley's mind. Even Alex couldn't help but be swept up in the moment. Whether he liked it or not (and whether the thing actually had 'magical abilities' or not), he was now witness to something frequently referred to as myth and dismissed merely as hype to sell merchandise.

Reverent pine trees circled perfectly around the *great* stone, none less than six yards away. The ground at its feet exhibited the only unbroken expanse of verdant grass within miles. The afternoon sun bled through the various slits on the forest's canopy. To the awestruck youths, it truly resembled a place of worship, a sun-soaked monastery of leaves and soil

"Alright, so what do we do?" Alex inquired, barely out of the mindset that they would never find the stupid thing.

"We ask it." Shelley replied absentmindedly, her legs motivated toward the stone. "It is a divining stone after all."

"Well okay then," Alex began. He rubbed his dirt-covered palms together. "I'll go first. I think I'll ask it why 'someone' forgot to bring the camera – so people would actually believe that we found the 'great and powerful' Sias Stone."

"Shut up!" Shelley scowled. "I was in a hurry. Anyway, yeah you go first. I still have to think of my question."

"Wow, I thought you'd have yours ready, waiting, and printed nicely on a note-card by now." Alex prodded sarcastically.

"So," Shelley acted as if she hadn't heard the remark, swiping through the wrinkled pages of her book. "You ask it a question by writing on it… and after a couple seconds, it should reply… but there are a couple of rules."

Alex looked on with unconvinced yet still anxious eyes.

"First," Shelley recited the text above her place-holding index finger. "You can ask only one question… second… only one person can observe the answer… and third… and this is the most important one… do not… DO NOT… ask who is in the grave."

Alex pursed his lips and lifted his brow with sardonically wide eyes.

"Gimme the chalk." He huffed, shaking his head slightly at his companion's stern authoritativeness.

After procuring the chipped length of chalk from Shelley's claw-like grip, Alex swaggered to the headstone's face and knelt over the strangely pristine patch of grass. Though still skeptical toward and disconnected from the whole possibility of the supernatural, he nonetheless respected the idea that this could be another human being's resting place.

Shelley sauntered to the rear of a looming pine, unquestioningly abiding by rule number two.

Alex twiddled the chalk between his first and second fingers, straining to maintain his hunched posture. Staring into the untouched, glassy sheen of the stone, Alex realized that nothing came to his mind – not a question, not even an inclination toward scribbling profanity or other juvenile

additions. He immediately felt drained and useless. What was the problem? Nothing was actually going to happen, right? After all, it 'is' all just idiotic superstition.

Alex shook the doubt from his head and pressed the chalk to the black, glossy surface.

Who… his hand tremblingly began. *Is*... *buried*... His eyes darted about with an impotent paranoia. *here?* He removed the slightly eroded piece of chalk from the headstone, tingling with excitement for his blatant disregard for rule number three.

The dusty white words sat on the smooth surface like stubborn intruders, as out of place as a gaudy ivory suit at a funeral service. Alex tilted back, sitting eagerly atop his ankles.

So what next? He thought, finding activity for his fidgety fingers.

Several seconds passed and still nothing had happened – no cryptic response, no paranormal happenings at all, not even a sudden shift in the speed of the wind. Alex then gazed deep into the glass-like, stone pillar, hoping that something – anything – would begin to appear. Still, nothing. He edged closer, maintaining an unblinking vice on the unaltered surface. The only movement was the intermittent flaking off of the crude lines of chalk.

Yet just when Alex began to lose hope (and in actuality, his interest), the stone darkened. The once shimmering surface turned dull and cloudy. Alex was immediately, and viscerally, mesmerized. His eyes panicked to seek out further change, perhaps a reply, a name, anything. He scoured from top to bottom, corner to corner. Maybe all the stories *were* true.

"Well?" An impatient voice broke out from behind, it was

Shelley's. "Anything happen?"

"Whoa, you're not supposed to be here," Alex exclaimed, obviously startled. "Only one person can look at the answer."

"Haha," Shelley scoffed. "I thought you didn't believe in silly superstition."

"I don't…" Alex retorted, unsure of himself and his words. "I…"

"C'mon, you didn't give in to all this stuff did you." Shelley looked to the stone. "I see you completely disregarded rule three, haha, I was going to ask it the same thing." Slowing circling her crouched friend, Shelley giggled. "Well at least we found the damn thing… for some reason I imagined it to be a lot bigger."

Pushed Too Far

By The Bleeding Pen

Words carved into grey stone, spotted with lichen and weather, made Gary's blood slow to a chilly crawl in his veins. His stomach felt watery, his legs soft. He folded to the ground, tunnel vision showing nothing but the chiselled words.

Gary Feldman
Taken Too Soon
With The Angels Now

"I'm not dead!" he screamed at the darkness above, his voice vanishing into a blanket of stars. Tears ran over his cheeks, tiny salt kisses on the corners of his mouth. "I'm not

dead," he said again, more quietly.

The grave lay covered in unkempt grass and weeds, neglected. A dry and rotten collection of old flowers stood in a dirty glass vase, forgotten. Gary swallowed a sob that threatened to burst from his throat, taking his sanity with it.

How had he ended up here? Was he dreaming? He pinched the skin of his upper arm. It hurt. Gritting his teeth he twisted cruelly. That hurt even more, made him cry out. But not wake up. Could you pinch yourself in a dream? Could you dream pain and stay asleep?

He wasn't just sitting before his own grave with no memory of dying. He was sitting here years after the event, the grave ignored and abandoned. He closed his eyes, trying to remember.

He recalled leaving the chicken shop, smelling of grease and stale sweat. He hated his job, but at least he had one. A distinct lack of schooling meant he was unlikely to ever get anything better than serving roast chicken to fat, lonely customers, but it was a job. He smiled at the memory of Pilkins, the spotty, skinny nerd. The only thing that made work bearable, forcing Pilkins to do horrible things. The kid was so easily embarrassed, so gullible, he did anything he was told. And Gary was happy to threaten physical violence at the slightest hint of resistance.

Gary's last memory was leaving work after getting Pilkins to mop up a grease spill with his own shirt. He grinned, remembering Pilkins standing there with his apron over his naked, pale torso, his weak arms like threads of cotton sticking out the sides. The kid trembled in the hot kitchen as Gary left.

Was that really the last thing he could remember? Pilkins'

eyes were burning with hatred, his puny, useless body shivering with impotent rage, those eyes full of hate, Gary laughing.

And he'd said something. Gary squeezed his eyes shut tighter, trying to force the memory up through soupy fog in his brain. Why was it so hard to remember?

One skinny white arm had come up, those burning eyes had narrowed, the livery lips had quivered as Pilkins had said... something. It wasn't English. That's right! He'd said something weird. It sounded like an old language. Like bubbles through tar the words slowly struggled to the surface of Gary's mind. 'Imprecor tu.'

What did that mean?

But there was more than that. Like a snowball starting an avalanche the memories flooded back. Gary had walked home along Union Street, then cut across the park, like he always did. The fizzing halogen light over the gateway soon faded behind him as he strolled into the inky darkness. Nothing scared him. He was burly and surly and nobody's victim.

Then a pale shape had emerged from the shadows. Gary jumped, surprise more than fear, then an icy chill of dread soaked through his bones. As the pale shape slowly became clearer, sliding unnaturally into the shape of a man, Gary's heart started hammering. As the man walked forward, resolving into the pimply, thin face of Pilkins, Gary's nerves thrummed with confusion.

He laughed, though it sounded hollow and brittle to his own ears. 'What are you doing here, Pilkins? How did you get here so fast?'

Pilkins drifted closer, his skin paler than ever, his eyes dark and rheumy under sagging lids, his lips hanging loose. His

teeth were broken and yellowed, jagged peaks and troughs in a mouth panting with a predatory desire. 'Imprecor tu,' he rasped, his voice harsh, slicing through the air.

"What does that mean?" Gary cried, his own voice high and thin. He cursed his fear even as his bladder let go, warm dampness spreading through his jeans. He staggered backwards, away from the steadily advancing Pilkins. But this shambling, flaccid creature wasn't really Pilkins, was it? "What are you?" Gary asked in a terrified whisper.

Pilkins' mouth split impossibly wide, a feral grin of pure malice and too many teeth. "You fucked with me one time too many, Gary."

"What? What do you mean?"

"You kept pushing and pushing, didn't you? Well, when you push hard enough, something gives. And when something gives, who knows what might come out."

Gary started crying, gasping sobs accompanied tears and snot to turn his face into a quivering mess. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Pilkins laughed, a wet, bubbling sound. "It's too late for that, bully. You've made your bed. Now lie in it!"

One long, thin hand, white and cold, shot out lightning fast and grabbed Gary's throat. Icy fingers closed around his trachea as Pilkins' other hand rose up, ghostly, before his face. "I'm going to kill you, Gary Feldman. And more than that, I'm going to make you suffer in death. Imprecor tu!"

Gary clawed at the waxy, chilled hand that held his throat. "What does that mean?"

"What does it mean? It means curse you!"

"Curse?"

"Oh yes, Feldman. Curse. You're fucked."

Pilkins' free hand shot forward as Gary screamed, frozen fingers with ragged nails piercing his eyeballs with vivid, scarlet agony and everything went dark.

Sitting on the damp grass before his neglected grave Gary's eyes snapped open and he gasped. His hands flew up to his eyes, feeling for damage, but everything felt fine. Except it couldn't be. He stood, looked around. The cemetery was in good repair, most of the graves well tended. Only his seemed to be in such a state of disrepair. 'How long have I been gone?' he whispered to himself.

"How long?"

With a cry of shock Gary spun around. There was Pilkins, ghoulish and icy like before. Only older. Where there had been a stringy, useless teenager there now stood a stronger, bulkier man. It was undoubtedly Pilkins, at least the broken, horrible version of Pilkins that Gary had last seen in the park, but the gangly teenager was grown now. "How long?" Gary asked again in a reedy, terrified voice.

"Ten years, Feldman. Your family had a funeral, everyone was very sad. Of course, they didn't know what a bastard you really were."

Gary shook his head, staring at the ground. "No. No it can't be true. Ten years? Am I really…" His voice disappeared in sobs.

"Dead? Oh yes, you're really dead. Your family came regularly to sit in vigil by your grave here, but I saw to that. Your father was easily distracted by booze and cheap women. It was surprisingly easy to destroy what remained of your happy family, broken with grief as they were."

Gary looked up into those hideous, rheumy eyes. “No. No, that can’t be true.”

“Oh, it’s true. Your mother’s grave is right there. She lasted a few years before opening her veins in a bath of hot water. Her life flooded out as she decried the cruel universe that had taken her son and destroyed her marriage. Cruel universe, indeed. I did laugh as I watched her die.”

Gary couldn’t speak, incomprehensible sounds stuttering from his throat as he read the words carved into the tombstone beside his.

Felicia Feldman
Much loved wife and mother
Now in Jesus' hands

His knees turned to water and he fell to the grass between his grave and his mother’s. He shook his head, sobbing in confusion, terror, grief. It couldn’t be true.

“I’m still working on breaking your father,” Pilkins said matter-of-factly. “It was easy to destroy everything around him, but he’s surprisingly resilient. His grave will be here by the next time we meet, though, you can rest assured of that.”

“Next time?”

“Oh, yes.” Pilkins surged forward, grabbing Gary by the face, those cold, sharp fingers pointing into his eyes again. “Next time. In ten years. And every ten years after that. You’ll die again and again, and every time, right before I kill you, I’ll show you what else about your life I’ve destroyed. Your sister is pregnant, by the way.”

In a blur of white those frozen fingers shot forward,

lightning agony lancing through Gary's brain as his scream tore at his eardrums and everything went black.

Round Eleven

Dragon Queen 'V' Mountain Witch

Winner: Dragon Queen

Stitched Up!

By Dragon Queen

The room is dark. I can't see much more than outlines. I can smell though. The sharp tang of antiseptic and sweet, cloying scent of drying blood are all I need to know that I haven't been moved for days.

I wonder if Ali's missing me? We're due to be married in a month – or at least it was a month to go when the guys and I had our weekend away.

She saw us off at the airport. I can still feel the imprint of her lips on mine.

"Make sure he comes back safely." She told Chris in that mock school teacher tone she likes. He laughed. "I'll bring him home safe."

What remains of Chris are piled in the far corner… so much for going home safely.

I still don't know why we were abducted. Are the others still looking for us? They won't find us. As far as I can tell, we're deep in the forest. The building we were brought to must

be well sealed or I'd be knee deep in flies.

A groan from the other gurney tells me Adrian is still with me. Phil hasn't made a noise in several hours. *I hope he's dead. It'd be a blessing.*

There's a click as the illuminated digital readout ticks over to midnight. *He'll return soon.* I try not to think about what He'd done to the others. For some reason, He hasn't touched me yet.

A green light flickers on the large cabinet in the corner. It draws my eyes; a vague outline behind the glass door brings the sour taste of bile to my mouth.

What is that thing? He wouldn't tell us anything, just kept repeating "It's all in the name of Science." as we were strapped to gurneys and wheeled in here.

I close my eyes. *Please God, let me get out of here.*

A sharp stab in my arm brings me awake. *I slept?* Bright light makes me squint as I open my eyes.

Looking up brings His eyes into view, the dark irises contracting and relaxing as if he is on a drug of some sort. "It's all for Science you know, all in the name of Science." His voice is muffled by the surgical mask.

A flood of lethargy sweeps my body, but my mind remains awake. *A local anaesthetic of some sort?*

He turns me on my side easily, props me up with rubber blocks, their strong stench irritating the back of my throat.

I hear him picking something up. If I could tense, I would.

He grunts, there's a snap, a crack of bone. Then he sighs. "In the name of Science."

What did he do to me? From this angle I can see Adrian.

Tubes from the gaping cavity in his chest run into the machine beside him, thick dark blood running along one set, thin bright blood along another. *What did he do to Adrian? Where's Phil?*

A scream echoes around the room. He looks up. "Ah, 341 is awake. Excellent." His footsteps fade away and Adrian's eyes pop open.

"Adrian, are… you…"

"Don't be daft, Joe, of course I'm not okay. That madman just took my heart out." Adrian blinks. "I didn't feel a thing, Joe. Just lay there and watched him do it."

"Why is he doing this?"

Adrian grins weakly "Haven't the foggiest. At least I'm relatively intact. Unlike poor Chris."

"What's happened to Phil?"

"I think he's 341. What's that thing in the glass fronted cabinet? You've got a better view than me."

I glance up and over Adrian. The green light is still blinking and the glass is frosted, but I can make out more than just the outline now. "It's a body I think. It doesn't have a head though."

He comes back into the room. "Were you two talking? That's good, it shows that a man can function without his heart or main nervous system."

A glimmer of sanity flickers in his dark eyes; my hope of escape returns. "Why are you doing this?" I ask. *Keep him talking.*

He gestures to the cabinet. "My brother died. I couldn't save him so I'm bringing him back to life a piece at a time."

"Where's my heart? When will you let us go?" Adrian demands. There's a long beep from the machine monitoring

him.

"You can be proud. You are the first ever living heart donor." He answers. "I put it into my brother before I woke 343 up."

"What about me?" the machine beeps again.

"I'm finished with you, 342. All I need is 343 now. 341 proved to be unhelpful. He went insane when I removed his eyes, so instead of using my brother's head and transplanting the eyes, I need a whole head transplant."

His calm exposition chilled me to the bone. "Head Transplant? what do you mean?"

"You'll find out. It's all in the name of Science." He giggles and the sanity disappears.

He picks up a syringe. "Sleepy time, 343…"

The room is dark still. Antiseptic, with no blood scents in the air. As I open my eyes, a light flickers on around me. I'm hooked up to a number of machines beside the bed I lie on.

"*Welcome back, Joe."* A voice whispers. It's very close to me, to my right and when I look in that direction, I see a man, the ghost of a man standing beside the bed.

His eyes are bloody sockets, dribbling blood and half the back of his head is missing, brain protruding. One arm has been severed at the elbow, on the other, he is missing a hand. A massive hole is where his chest should be and he only has one leg.

"Are you *His* Brother?" I ask, surprised that my voice is working.

"*Yes. I'm sorry he did this to you and your friends. I couldn't stop him."*

I can't say anything to that. The thought of Chris's

dismembered body, Adrian's gaping chest, Phil without the big brown eyes that made him irresistible to the girls; it sickens me. I can't forgive.

"Where is he?" I glance around the room. It's a normal hospital style room.

"*Busy convincing the authorities that you are me. What do you want to do?"* Ali's face crosses my mind and the ghost seems to see it. "*You only have two choices I'm afraid and she can't be in either of them."*

A tear runs down my cheek. "What choices?"

"*Live as me – I can help you by possessing you if necessary, or die and get reborn. Simple really."*

"How long have I got?" I looked at the window where light seeped through the slats of the blind.

"*Not much longer. You must choose quickly."*

I raise my left hand. It's not mine. Chris's huge pongid hand is there. I check my right. God, Chris had huge paws. How much of the rest of me is not my body?

"The only bit of you that is you…is your head and brainstem. The rest is an amalgamation of your other two friends. And before you ask, yes, they are dead. I shepherded both Chris and Adrian upstairs two days ago."

The light floods in as the blind is automatically opened. I wince and blink; it's a beautiful morning. I look at Chris's hands again.

"What happens to your brother?" I ask the ghost who has faded under the onslaught of sunlight.

"*If you live as me, you'll have to look after him. Keep him away from sharp objects like boning saws etc. If you die, the authorities will autopsy to find out why and well, the state will*

end up looking after him, one way or another."

I look out the window. "I'm stitched up good and proper then, aren't I." taking several long, deep, breaths, I make my mind up. "It's a beautiful morning to die."

The Ghost smiles. "*Maybe next time round you'll be more lucky."* The ghost reaches across to the machines, his stump vanishing inside the heart monitor.

The body leaps from the bed, juddering and shaking. I can feel myself shaken loose and I slip easily from the flesh which has begun to char…

"*Shall we go then?"* the Ghost asks.

"*Will there be beer and football?"* I ask.

The ghost rolls his eyes. *"You Europeans are all the same – your friends asked exactly the same thing."*

"*Will they be there too?"*

"*Yes."*

"*Let's go then!"*

I glance back into the room as we leave. The mismatched body lies smoking on the floor, the sprinkler system giving it a good shower. The door flies open and He charges in.

"No!"

"*Oh yes, little brother."* The ghost says. "*You never asked me if I wanted to be brought back."* He can't hear him though. Strangely, that makes me feel better. I look up at the bright morning sun we are flying towards and smile.

Head Hunter

By: Mountain Witch

Standing there in the living room doorway, staring out across the road into the darkness, I let my mind drift. Everyone in the small neighborhood seemed to be in bed. All the houses' lights were out, the dogs had bedded down for the night and the cats and rabbits were about their nocturnal business.

I reached for the storm door's handle and that's when I saw it. It gave me pause but the need to step out and smoke blurred my sense of reason. Well, that and the fact that I hadn't slept in three nights and was exhausted to the point where my brain was slow in comprehending things.

Even now, I'm not sure what I thought I saw. I knew I'd seen something that should not have been there, something *weird*. As soon as the thing disappeared into the shadows, I stepped out, dismissing it as only a night critter that my weary brain had misinterpreted. After all, it was all the way across the road at old Ms. Hensley's house—that long distance rendered it harmless enough to put me at ease.

Sitting in a clumsy lawn chair at three in the morning, smoking a cigarette in the country night made me feel better than I had in months. While I gazed at the stars, I began to feel paranoid, as if someone was watching me. I checked the houses closest to me, expecting to see someone peeking around a curtain. See, the people here are extremely nosy and seem to know my business better than I do. That makes me furious. Anyway, back to the story. I saw no one but the being-watched feeling grew stronger and stronger until I was positive someone

was spying.

Pissed to the gills, I stood up and stomped back toward my front door, cursing the whole way, hoping that whoever was watching would come out and tell me to shut my filthy mouth —hey, it was not impossible; they had done it before. That's when I saw the thing from Ms. Hensley's yard again. Only this time I saw it up close.

It stepped out from the shadow beside my porch and stood near the Rose-of-Sharon shrub. Now, I don't believe in ghosties and ghoulies or leprechauns and fairies. Nope. No such stuff. Silly stories to scare or intrigue over-active imaginations. Nevertheless, the sight of this dark-skinned, dwarfish man with overly long arms and silvery-white eyes drained all my rage, quieted my curses and killed my disbelief.

I dropped my cigarettes and lighter and stood there wide-eyed and unblinking just staring at it. He reached behind the shrub and pulled a sack out of the shadow. I tried to run, scream, faint and accomplished none of those things.

The monster grinned wickedly, showing large, misshapen teeth.

I shook my head—I didn't want to see what was in that bag.

He nodded—I was going to see it, like it or not.

His hand emerged from the bag, fingers knotted in long gray hair. A severed head dangled an inch from the dewy grass. Ms. Hensley's head. The world turned cold and I started to faint. The monster pointed at me, mimicked looking at his wristwatch (which he wasn't wearing), letting me know that my turn was coming; my head would be the next one in his bag. I hit the ground like a sack of hammers.

I woke before dawn and ran inside the house, checked on the kids and my husband—fine. The morning came, the sun rose and the kids got ready and left for school, my husband left for work and I started my household chores. Everything seemed bright and normal. Until the ambulance and cops descended on Ms. Hensley's house.

The next day's headline read: ***MYSTERIOUS DEATH: Elderly woman brutally murdered in own home, neighbors devastated***. There were no suspects or leads.

I want to tell the cops what I know, but I'm afraid they will send me to the nuthouse, away from my family. Or worse, they will think I did it.

I guess I will leave a diary entry explaining it all and hope it's found after the headlines read: ***ANOTHER MYSTERIOUS DEATH: Another woman murdered in her home…***

If you live near my neighborhood, know there is a head hunter on the lam. He likes to hunt in the pre-dawn hours when it's darkest out and he seems to be fond of women with long hair.

Round Twelve

Dragon Queen 'V' Gash Panic

Winner: Dragon Queen

Almost Safe

By Dragon Queen

You aren't sure what wakes you up at first. Your hands tell you that you're still in the hospital; you have a duvet at home, not sheets and blankets. Your eyes feel sore. You remember why you are there; eye surgery. Bringing your hands to your face, there are bandages over your eyes; sliding a finger under the cotton, you can feel the stitches through your eyelids, holding them closed. Shuddering, you pull your hands away.

Your nose twitches; you sneeze. As you sniff, you catch a strong smell of smoke. Hospitals have fire doors don't they? Why can I smell smoke? The smoke thickens, you can feel a hazy heat on your exposed skin and the smoke makes you cough. Should I move or will I get rescued? You try and remember what you were taught at school about being trapped in a smoke filled room. Get to the floor.

Coughing, you roll out of bed and onto the floor. The tiles are cool and down here there is enough clear air to breathe. Now what? Where was the door? Staying on your belly, you crawl towards where you think the door is. It's a small room,

the only private room you could afford.

There were two doors. Didn't one have the push-bar fire doors have? You remembered correctly and put the back of your hands to both; snatching your right hand away with a curse. Ow, that's hot! The fire must be out there. Kneeling up against the cool door, you find the push-bar and fall through as it opens. Carefully you move into the next room, using your hands to figure out where to move to. The door slams shut after you.

Questing fingers tell you that there is only a narrow platform around the edge of the room. Must be a maintenance shaft or something, which means there will be an escape ladder around here somewhere.

You find what feels like a bridge stretching out from the centre of the platform. Maybe there's a fire ladder on the other side? It's not very wide and to avoid the possibility of falling, you crawl across the bridge. On the other side, there is another door and a ladder. Using the ladder to pull yourself up, you feel the door with the back of your hand. It's not hot. Is there a handle? Feeling across the door, you can't find any way of opening it. The only way is up then.

You start climbing. Dizziness assaults you and you grip the ladder with both your fingers and toes. I'm still weak from the operation. Better take it easy. Your exposed skin feels chill from the sweat you're producing. Losing track of how many rungs you've climbed is easy and you slip into a trance.

The heat registers first, as a slight warming of your skin, building until the heat evaporates your sweat as it forms. A faint roaring noise makes you pause and look back down the shaft, despite the eye bandage. There is a flickering orange

glow right at the bottom, visible even through your bandages and stitched eyelids. The fire must've burned through an access door or something. I'd better move faster. The ladder is starting to heat up, you keep going, glad that you can't see anything around you. The roar becomes a deafening wave of sound and your eyelids flare into brightness. There's a fireball coming! Moving as quickly as you can, you tumble onto a platform similar to the first. A breeze alerts you to the position of a door and your hands find the push bar, just a second too late. The fireball slams into you and the door, throwing the door across the roof outside and crisping the skin on your back, your cotton pyjamas flaming and falling off your body as you crash to the ground and black out.

Coming round again, your back feels raw, the cold breeze blowing over it causing pain as well as relief. Sharp gravel cuts into your chest and right cheek. It sticks to your skin as you push yourself to your feet and run your hands over your body. Your front has been spared any burns, but trying to move any faster produces agony everywhere. You've got to get to safety. The bandages over your eyes have been burned away and you can see sunlight through your eyelids and between the gaps in the stitches.

Moving forward slowly, bare feet being ripped to shreds on the gravel of the roof. You can hear sirens and shouts coming from below and you angle yourself towards the noise in the hope that someone will be able to save you. "Hey there! You on the roof!" a voice, magnified somehow, assaults your damaged sensitive ears. It's accompanied by a thumping, thudding that sweeps air towards you.

Helicopter. A rescue helicopter? You try to reply, but your

throat is too raw from smoke inhalation to speak. You settle for waving and start moving towards the noise and voice.

"Keep moving, the building is about to collapse! We'll lower our rope ladder so you can grab on and we can hoist you away." The voice is reassuring and you can just about make out the rattling as they lower the ladder.

Behind you there is a rumble and a flare of heat. Forcing yourself to move faster, despite the burns, you reach out in front, trying to find the ladder with your hands. Under your feet you feel the roof and gravel slipping away. "You're on the roof edge, mate! Grab the ladder, it's just in front of you!" The voice holds a note of panic; you wave your arms around trying to find the ladder. One hand comes into contact with a solid bar and you grasp it tightly. "See if you can…" your rescuer starts, sounding a little closer, but his voice is obliterated in the noise of an explosion that rocks the collapsing building. A sudden wave of hot air on your already raw back makes you scream and the ladder you are holding onto is almost wrenched out of your hands. You manage to keep hold of it with one finger.

"What in all hell was that?" the rescuer shouts. You don't hear the answer from the pilot. "Whatever it was, we need to get this poor blighter away from the building fast. Move back in close." There's another silence. "I don't care! I am not leaving him to die like this."

Panicking that you might be left here, you manage to grasp the ladder in both hands. You feel the building crumbling under your feet; brick, mortar and gravel slipping backward as the roof below you dissolves into the shaft.

"Hold tight, mate! We'll swing you clear onto another roof top so you can climb up properly." The rescuer shouts

down to you. You grip the rung with hands that are slick with sweat from the heat emanating from the building. A deep rumble below you gives you a second's warning before there is a second massive blast. The enormous gust of superheated air it creates, throws the helicopter away from the building again; you feel your feet blister and smell the flesh burning as you are dragged off the burning hospital roof.

"Oh shiiiitt!" the rescuer yells. "Hold onto that ladder, we'll try to…" there is a third, smaller detonation and several bangs above you tell you that the helicopter is being hit by small objects. There are two screams. Something hard hits you in the hip, pain ricochets up your body and one hand slips on the rung; you fight uselessly to regain the handhold.

Dangling from one arm, twisting in the draught from the rotors; your back screaming with agony from burns and straining muscles, you wonder if you'll survive. The helicopter lurches and starts to slide sideways through the air, you lose your grip on the Ladder and fall. This is it. I'm going to die. You tumble as you plummet, making your stomach heave spewing bile into the atmosphere.

You land on something hard, it creaks for a second and then you fall again, your eyes fly open, the stitches tearing through the delicate skin as you land. Though your vision is blurred, you can see that you fell through a glass roof. Blood runs down your face in rivulets.

At least I'm alive. Over you, you make out the shape of the helicopter caught by the rotors on the floor above the glass roof. A white blur is looking down at you from the window; as the helicopter tears free of the building, plunging rotor down towards the broken glass roof, a black hole opens

in the white blur.

The rotor slams down through the gap and stabs through your stomach, blood and fluids fountain up, anguish flooding your body.

The last thing you hear is the rescuer screaming over and over again.

Let Go Samuel

By Gash Panic

You are back at the lake again, Samuel. Still looking. The gray Pennsylvania mist aches through denuded trees as you shuffle through the mattress of leaves along the old stone path leading to the cabin. Overhead a lone goose cries.

How many times have you come back now? Seven? Eight? Each time it's the same, each time the lake is cold, sometimes even with the first rime of an early frost.

It's twilight already, you've driven all day through the grimy desiccated eastern lanes. Since ninety-four you've avoided free-ways, though few people still understand that. By now you should be over that particular hurt, especially in the light of how bad it was at the lake.

It was late, you'd had a few beers, but the other driver had had a whole lot more and his big GMC had crushed your car, passenger side first, pinning Melanie, enclosing tiny Georgina, in her child seat, inside a case of strips and blocks of ripped metal and pieces of scored and shattered plastic molding. It took hours to free you all.

They imprisoned the other driver, eventually, and you and Melanie, when the insurance finally came through, bought the

cabin from your father.

You hesitate, at the rise in the long driveway. You're walking, you've parked the car further down. You can't drive up this way now, haven't been able to since that night.

Somewhere from across the hills you can hear heavy machinery. They are tearing the earth apart here, looking under the surface for titanium and coal. Slowly they are ripping away the forest edges, sloughing off the overburden, as if a forest was some kind of burden the very rocks must bear upon their shoulders, creating hollows the company would like to simply fill with water and call fishing lakes but, legislated, must replace with some semblance of woodland. Those replacement forests, you know from other detouring visits, are gravely and sparse, no forests at all.

Here on the rise, now, with the chilled air and the sound of distant engines, you huff, close your eyes and step on down. After a moment you open your eyes and see those charred brittle foundations again.

They are barely changed, another year has had little impact. The definition remains, the stone surrounds still in place, the heavy roof anchor beam still lying across the hallway and living room timbers. Some windfall branches from the older trees have fallen within the margins of the cabin, their white bark a stark contrast with the charcoal remnants. Leaves rot in the corners.

At the doorway you stop again, as you do each time. You see the fire.

Flames, where are the flames coming from? Someone's there? Melanie?

“Samuel, Samuel,” she called. You remember, you

remember so well.

"Mel," you called back.

"I told you there was someone out there."

You'd fallen asleep in the cabin's living room and, just as you could never convince yourself that you'd not fallen asleep on the free-way in that moment before meeting the truck, you could never be sure that the moment in the chair, when you'd fallen asleep with the paperback on your lap, that it had not been another crucial moment.

"I told you," Melanie had screamed.

You'd sat upright, quickly, the Budweiser can tipping, rolling across the floor.

There, at the window, a man. Standing out beyond the deck,

"Mel?"

"He was following us."

"I-"

"If you hadn't been just sitting around with..."

The man began moving back, step by step, out of the light, making gradually for the trees.

"Get Georgina," you said. "Get her now."

And the man was gone.

In this cool air, with night falling, you stand at the threshold, able to imagine the framework and panelling of the cabin that stood here, the cabin your father bought long before anyone thought there might be anything this deep in the mountains worth hauling away for the electricity fires or metal industry. You remember the wind chime that Georgina had made from spoons and forks, bought from the Salvation Army store, and nylon fishing twine. You remember hanging it for

her, hearing her giggle as the first breaths of wind turned it, tinkling and jangling. The police team had handed you a bag with the blackened bent utensils long after things were all done.

You glance across at the lake, see glinting and spreading Vs from paddling birds, hear the plop of a fish jumping for evening insects. You see the gap through the trees where the man first vanished.

High above, jet contrails shine like polished knives. You still hesitate here. It takes more than you have to be able to step into the place where they sifted out her tiny bones. But then you move your foot over the stones and into the old cabin.

It was too late. You locked the door, the very door where you stand now, but he'd already gone around to the window, unlatched it. You heard Melanie shout.

The cabin was small, Georgina's room just steps away. When you turned, you saw him in there, saw his eyes, saw Melanie trying to wrench Georgina from the maniac's arms. You remember the door slamming.

You stand here in the damp, cold, coagulated ashes, right at the place the door had been. You shiver, but do not zip your jacket. If you had just let the lawyer abandon that case, just let him say no, but he had pursued it on and on, appeal after appeal. "Call it pro bono," he'd said.

“Just stop,” you'd told him. “Let it go.”

Standing here, you remember the man's face, scarred and battered as it was. You remember it even better than you can recall Melanie's or Georgina's. You reach your hand up and can almost feel the heat again. You can almost hear your own screams.

This is as far as you have ever come. You have never

been able to step over the threshold into the charred square where they died.

The sun has set now, the sky rippled and as orange as sodium lights. You can still hear the machines devouring the earth, they do not stop for dark, keep grinding under their own lights. Their sound seems to slap across the lake and back, as if they are closing in. You look out, past where the kitchen nook was, out past the jetty, and you can see the white glow from the hidden pit.

The land has been sold, at the time it seemed smart, the money was good, enough for another two cabins elsewhere, and coming here is so wrenching. Standing here now, though, you wonder. This will be your last visit. No longer will you be able to stand here on this precipice and back away, striving for some kind of absolution you know is reserved only for the dead. Never again will you be able to avoid crossing this line because it will have been absorbed into spoil, into a tailings dump which might perhaps be regurgitated into some semblance of forest. You turn.

Then you see it. Georgina's locket. It sparkles in this peculiar combination of dusk and mining halogens. It lies beyond the room, outside the empty demarcations of the old foundation, as if she was somehow able to hurl it away from her attacker, as if she had a moment of courage.

You put your hand up again, imagine that you are pushing on the door, opening it against the raging flames he set to consume them and himself.

And for a moment you are inside that room, with the blades of fire slicing your family to cinders. You see the walls flaking and peeling, but you still cannot find their faces. Your

cheeks are wet with tears and you can hear from so long ago your own pounding on the blocked door, hear your own screaming as the door burned away under your hands, hear your very own wailing as you stumbled back from the heat, your face puffy and red with blisters and welts.

You blink this away.

You step through the room, towards that spark.

Goodbye. Goodbye, my girls, goodbye, you say inside. You gasp. One of the branches taps your thigh and you grab it, push it aside and then you let go.

You step over the stones and out to the wet ground, reaching into the leaves. And of course it is not her locket. Forensics scoured everything, her locket had melted away. But you smile and sniff now, sit crying and grinning because you stepped into the room, at your very last chance. You stepped into the room, Samuel, and maybe you've let go.

The Final!

.

As the crowd becomes more and more anxious, shuffling in their seats and straining their necks to see, Dragon Queen stands in the arena, patiently waiting for her next contender. She smiles smugly to herself, knowing that one contender has already backed out, terrified of losing to this ferocious female warrior. And now she stands and waits for her new contender to step out into the arena.

A dwarf, caped in a dark gown, runs from the opponents' cage and up the steps to where the House Madame sits on her throne of bones. Silence falls upon the crowd as the dwarf whispers something into the House Madame's ear.

The House Madame stands and raises a hand into the air. Dragon Queen kneels.

"It would appear that not only one, but two contenders have refused to battle against the mighty Dragon Queen!"

A loud uproar travels through the crowd. Boos and hisses spread through the stalls, disappointment among them knowing that there are no more contenders.

"Silence!" The House Madame shouts. "We shall have one more duel!"

The patrons rise, clapping, stomping their feet and cheering loudly.

"We shall bring two back from the dead for one last duel. The two contenders with the highest wins shall have one more chance. If they succeed they shall become immortal."

Dragon Queen stands, a look of bewilderment on her face. The House Madame points her outstretched finger and a flash of light fills the arena. Two figures rise from the light and stand tall in front of Dragon Queen.

"Dwight the Fright and Jayradikill. You both have had the most wins before you were defeated. Now is your chance to prove to me how much of a warrior you really are. The three of you will do battle to the death. The last one standing will be the winner. Good luck to you all…"

Round Thirteen

Dwight the Fright 'V' Jayradikill 'V' Dragon Queen

Winner: DRAGON QUEEN!

The Final Battle

By Dragon Queen

I step back, shedding my cloak. The silver on my dagger and belt sparkles in the torch light. “Well Gentlemen? Are you man enough to take on an unarmed woman?”

“You’re not unarmed. I can smell what you are.” Dwight growls.

“And either you haven’t bathed since you were defeated or you’re as much a pure Human as I.” Leaping into the air, I somersault over the top of him, faster than most of the crowd can follow.

“Of course, I haven’t been Human for a long, long time now. Dwight spins and as he takes a swipe at me, I dance backward. “Stand still, Bloodsucker!” Laughing, I evade every attack with flair, drawing on my martial arts and gymnastics training to make Dwight look as clumsy as possible.

The crowd cheers as I lead him in a circle around Jayradikill who hasn’t moved or said anything since the start of the duel. Curious, I move in close to the silent man.

“Jayradikill?”

He raises his head and the stench from his breath almost

knocks me out; I back away. He groans and reaches toward me.

Dwight skids to a stop in front of me, focused on attacking me and not noticing that Jayradikill has started to shuffle softly forward. “I’ve got you now, bitch.”

Either it’s a trick of the light, or he’s starting to change… I glance around, trying to plan my next move… Huh? We’re not in the arena anymore!

The cheering crowd and slimy dungeon walls have vanished. Around us lie gravestones of varying antiquity, long grass sheathing most of them. The cemetery is surrounded by a forest, conifers scenting the evening air and moss draped oaks cast eerie shadows as the last of the sunset vanishes behind the trees.

Taking advantage of my distraction, Dwight lunges at me.

Thank Caine I jumped out of reflex. I hover in mid air, about six foot above the two males.

“Get down here you-ooooo!” Dwight howls in frustration.

“If I were you, wolfman, I would get away from Jayradikill or he’ll start carving you up for lunch.” I call back, wafting myself a little higher.

Dwight jumps, trying to grab hold of my feet; as he comes back down Jayradikill grabs hold of Dwight’s shirt. “Huh? What the…” he pulls away and his shirt rips like paper in Jayradikill’s grip.

Stumbling, Dwight scrambles over a gravestone. In the twilight, Jayradikill looks up at me and flails his arms. “Geeeeerrrraaagh.”

“Sweet Denmother! He’s a Zombie.” Dwight heads toward a large mausoleum, climbing up onto the roof. He perches there, glaring down at the drooling Undead attempting

to climb up. “Must have been out too long to be brought back to being Human properly.”

Resting on another tomb, I listen to the rasping gurgling of Jayradikill’s breathing and look up. High thin clouds scud across the sky and a faint white glow on the eastern horizon suggests the moon is about to rise.

Running swiftly through the spells I can use, I realise I am too low on blood to do much yet. While Dwight is busy trying to crush Jayradikill with pieces of the tomb he sits on, I slip into the forest, moving softly over the twig littered ground.

“There has to be a large animal around here somewhere I can feed from.” Using what is left of my last feed and stopping my breathing, I cast out an Ethereal net. Dwight shows up immediately, some three hundred metres behind me. I’m not feeding from him. I shudder and cast it again. The shape of a deer, about fifty metres to my left shows up; I begin my Hunt.

* * *

“Wheeeeree sheee gooaarrn?” Jayradikill looks around.

Dwight hefts the stone he has, aware that the moon has risen and he is minutes away from changing. “You can still talk? I didn’t think Zombies had enough brains for that.”

“Brrrraaaiiinnns!” Jayradikill moans and starts trying to climb again.

“Looks like I was wrong.” Dwight shrugs and drops the stone onto the zombie, sending half the creature’s face splattering across the grass.

“Aaarrrrggggh!” Jayradikill shuffles backward out of range.

Dwight glances up at the sky. The clouds have gathered high and the wind has dropped. The stench of the rotting human below him fills his nose and he coughs. “Phwargh! I have got to get rid of you, Undead.”

“ooogh iiigh eiiigh geehh ooo fffiirrss.” The zombie has shambled around behind him and is slowly scrambling up the ruined back wall of the tomb.

Dwight jumps off the tomb and runs through the tall grass toward the Chapel at the edge of the cemetery; the Zombie follows him. Half way across the full moon emerges from the clouds. “No Not… now.” he gasps, dropping to the ground, writhing with pain, unable to move much further.

“Goooghh ooo nnooow.” Jayradikill speeds up, obviously hoping to get the werewolf while he is vulnerable.

“That’s not particularly sporting.” I call down from my perch on the Chapel roof.

“Waaggh ooo dooinnngg abbboo ittttgh” Jayradikill spits several teeth out in a spray of blood as Dwight manages to kick him across his ruined face.

“Well, I could let you kill him, then dismember you.” I raise one hand and whisper a bloodspell. A shaft of light appears and solidifies into a transparent sword. “But then you would come after me, so…” Taking the sword I launch myself over the prone, writhing form of the part changed werewolf and slice one arm from the zombie’s body.

Jayradikill stumbles backward and I turn on one heel behind him, removing the other arm. Blood and mucus spray across the grass, dripping down nearby gravestones and matting Dwight’s fur as he scrambles away, panting, from Jayradikill.

Ignoring the weakened werewolf for a few seconds longer, I somersault over the armless zombie, spin in front of him and slice a leg off.

Jayradikill balances on one leg. “ooo ‘ooootttennngh ammmppiiirrrghh!”

“Speak for yourself!” I continue the motion through his other leg. His torso thumps onto the earth as I stand up, flicking gore away. “Any last words?”

“Bbbiiigggtttccchh!” Jayradikill swears at me and I can see his body parts starting to inch their way back towards the torso.

“Oh, no you don’t!” with one last swipe, I cut the thing’s head from the body and mutter another bloodspell. Blue flames flare up around each part and I have to step back from the heat.

“That should deal with him.” I mutter and raising my sword, I look around for Dwight.

A rank, animalistic scent tickles my nose and I sneeze, just moments before the werewolf lands on my back, knocking the sword out of my hand.

“Gotcha, Bloodsucker!” Dwight snarls into my ear. “Thanks for the help, but you just signed your own death warrant.”

I step forward. “Just because you’re on my back, doesn’t mean… you’re… going to…stay… there!”

Grabbing his paws with both hands, I bow low, sending the massive rug-like animal flying over my head and into the side of the chapel. A crack appears in the mortar holding the stones together and there’s a creak; a few slates fall from the roof, smashing on the gravestones around Dwight.

I feel at my belt as the walking wolfpelt scrambles up; my

fingers find what I am looking for. “You won’t get the better of me, Animal.” Spinning, my silver dagger flies from my fingers, thudding hilt deep into Dwight’s chest.

He laughs and pulls it out, a stream of blood following it. “Nice try, but you’ve been reading too much Human Fiction. Silver doesn’t touch us.”

I shrug. “It was worth a try; I’m always well prepared.” He charges and I jump, watching him pass underneath me harmlessly.

“Stop doing that!” he growls, spinning.

“But then I wouldn’t get to do this…” Swooping down, I ram a glass bladed throwing knife under his jaw.

Dwight coughs and a stream of silvery liquid dribbles down his jaw. Dropping to one knee, he fumbles at the hilt. “What...” he starts before he falls onto his back, the silvery liquid seeping from the corners of his eyes. He gasps.

“Quicksilver or Mercury, as it is known to Humans, is poisonous when ingested.” I say, landing beside him. “It is the only metal known to be poisonous to Werewolves, especially this particular type. Any last words?”

“Bitch!” Dwight gurgles as the spelled Quicksilver uses his blood and other bodily fluids to multiply.

There is a roar of the crowd as the arena shimmers back into being. By one wall there is a pile of ash. In front of me, Dwight coughs and bubbles.

“And the Winner is…” the Madame watches as Dwight’s mouth fills with Quicksilver and he breathes his last. “The Dragon Queen!”

Retrieving my cloak, I sweep it around my shoulders and bow deeply to the House Madam.

"I couldn't have done it without help from Dwight and Jayradikill!"

Truth in the Midst of the Battle

By Dwight Patterson

Dwight shook his head free of cobwebs, blinked and took in the cage he lay in. The wooden crate stank of feces and rot. He pushed onto his knees. Bones shifted beneath his weight; a skull toppled from a small pile. A hole sat in its center, the bone splintered.

"Where am I?"

He reached for the door, steel bars welded into a steel frame and bolted to the wooden cage. In the light of the moon, he saw the fur on his hands and arms, the extended claws of his fingers, yellowed and cracked and caked with dirt and what looked like blood.

"No," he said and patted his chest. Hazy memories of a war, of his brethren falling to an unseen enemy, of a bullet laced in silver, screaming through the night… "I should be dead."

One finger found the hole, poked around until it touched the warped slug.

"Our final combatant has awoken," a booming voice yelled, followed by the cheers of hundreds, of thousands of humans.

Dwight shook his head again. The humans, he fought for them. A deal was made… His thoughts searched the wreckage of his mind, but recollection avoided him. He stood and

lumbered to the door, placed both hands on the steel bars. A jolt of electricity shot through him. His hands locked up, his grip tightened; fur singed and organs cooked as lightning ran through him.

"Away," the guard yelled and jabbed him with a rubber-tipped lance. Dwight fell away from the door, staggered and fell back. He landed in the pile of bones. A howl escaped him as one of the broken bones ripped through his thigh.

The crowd cheered at his wail.

Dwight started to rip the bone free, but stopped when the door began to open. He stood, clawed hands clenched into fists.

"Come," the guard called. "Come face your end"

My end?

The barrel of a shotgun appeared in the door, followed by the quick whispers of the guard. "Silver bullets will end your existence. If you resist or attack, I will kill you."

Teeth gritted, Dwight stepped through the door and into the arena. He scanned the screaming onlookers. They threw stones and sticks, not only at him, but two others who stood outside the entrances to their own cages. A dead man swayed from side to side, his arms dangling, his head cocked to one side, mouth slackened. A vampire—a woman with long brown hair, her fangs bore for the crowd to see—held defiance in her stance, one that said if she were to live through this, she would kill every human within her reach.

"You are the last of your kind," a woman's voice called. The rabid mob grew quiet.

The last of my kind? His brain latched onto the memory, no longer searching, but knowing the truth. The gun was held, not by the enemy, but the ally, a human who had signed a treaty

with the wolves; a treaty of unity after the eradication of the undead who threatened to annihilate the human race…

Anger rose as heat coursed through his body. The final words of the woman's speech trailed into his mind. “A fight to the death.”

The multitude cheered.

Dwight stood still as the vampire raced toward him, not wanting to fight, to kill again.

“You don't have much time,” the guard said from inside the cage. “The sun will be coming up soon.”

Off in the distance, the brilliance of the moon faded and morning beckoned. “Bastards.”

The vampire lunged, her hands extended, mouth open. “You die tonight, wolf.”

They toppled backward. Dwight let out another howl, this one filled with the anger and hurt the onlookers lusted for, as the vampire sunk her teeth into his forearm. They rolled over, she falling away and Dwight rising to his feet.

“Wait,” he yelled to the vampire, hoping to join forces against their new enemy. He read her eyes. Insanity had set in. There would be no reasoning with her. Like him, she was the last of her breed and faced extinction. Any hope of getting her to help him vanished as she attacked again. He dodged, his thigh screaming as the bone jutting from it shifted, tore through muscle.

He tucked a shoulder, rolled and came up onto his feet. The vampire fell forward, falling to the ground with an exasperated shriek. The zombie approached him, a moan in his long dead throat. He scraped Dwight's shoulder with a ragged fingernail. Dwight spun away from snapping teeth, trying to

keep an eye on the vampire and ward off the zombie at the same time.

Stop dancing around. His mind screamed as images of the past surfaced again. His world had been dimming, eyes struggling to stay open as… as humans advanced on the wolves' ranks. The undead lay wasted along the crumbling streets of the dying city. The vampires were on the run, fleeing at night while their numbers were still plenty, but dying during the day when the wolves and humans pinned them in buildings or caves or in the sunlight. The bullets rang out, the anguished cries of the dying wolves, their bodies reverting back to the flesh and blood of man, only to be stamped out by the humans. Their guard had been down. How many of his people fell that day? The zombie shambled forward, his groan pulling Dwight from his memories.

"Not again. Never again," Dwight said and swiped at the rotting corpse. His claws tore through decaying flesh, snapped his spine in half and sent the zombie to the ground in a heap of fetid brown blood and organs. The zombie crawled after him, its hands sinking into the ground for leverage.

Dwight gripped the bone poking from his thigh. He gave a growl and yanked it free. Hot pain seared his leg. He raised the bone high, brought it down on the zombie's head. Its skull cracked, split and the creature went limp.

"I'm sorry," Dwight said.

He turned to see the vampire coming at him, her face a mask of hate. The moon was fading in the horizon, the sun waking. His body tingled and his fur thinned. In seconds, his thick arms and legs would be normal and average in strength at best.

The vampire pounced, her nails sinking into both shoulders. Her eyes widened, the sneer became a grimace. They landed hard on the ground, Dwight on top of her, the bone in his hands shoved upward between two ribs. Tears leaked from her eyes and her mouth moved without speaking any real words. For the second time that night, he voiced his apologies.

The sun rose higher and the vampire's skin began to sizzle. Dwight held her down, keeping the bone wedged in her chest. He stroked her hair like a lover. “I'll make them pay for this,” he said. “I promise you. I'll make them pay.”

A faint smile formed on her cracking lips. Her hair became brittle and broke away beneath his fingers. Hate grew within him. As her body deteriorated, he yanked the bone away. Her ashes flitted in the early morning breeze. The people cheered.

Victory was his. Freedom was—

“Back into the cage with you,” the guard snapped, nudged Dwight with his shotgun.

“I won,” Dwight argued. “I get to go free.”

“Sure yah do. Now, get in the cage.”

Dwight put his hands above his head and limped back to the blackness that awaited him. Before the door closed, he turned back to the guard, taking in his dark uniform, his helm covered head, the gloves on his hands… its lone weakness.

“Your kind are the real monsters,” Dwight said.

“What's that you say?” the guard spat and poked Dwight hard with the barrel.

“You're liars. You break your promises.”

The guard leaned in the door. “Well, I promise you this,

wolf, you won't see another night after the last one."

"Are you certain?"

Dwight grabbed the gun and drove the bone under the guard's helm and between his breast plate to the only exposed part of his body—the front of his throat. The guard lurched forward and fell into the cage with Dwight.

The crowd let out a stunned gasps and screamed when the shotgun went off. Dwight had little time to pull the guard's clothes from his body. He hoped the other soldiers wouldn't notice the hole in the ground where the shell had been discharged. He slid the guard's clothes on, set the helm on his head. For good measure, he fired the shotgun again, taking off the dead human's head.

Dwight stepped from the cage, gun in hand, as the others ran for him. "It's okay," he called, put a hand out to them. "The wolf is dead."

"Did he hurt you?" one of the guards asked.

"He tried." Beneath the helm, Dwight smiled. Tonight he would get revenge…

As the Slaying Goes

By Jayradikill

A great flash of white-yellow light filled the stadium. It ran through the stands, the concessions, and the blood-soaked battlefield. The crowd instinctively pulled their eyes away. Dragon Queen – the competitor with the tensed, pulsating muscles and dribbling fangs – winced at the phosphorescent phenomenon. The only figure left with wide eyes was the one

atop a throne of skulls and spines: the infamous House Madame. She grinned a maniacal grin and nestled deeper into her perch of skeletal remains; the show was about to begin.

A flash. In a gladiatorial ring inside a decrepit stadium within a long since abandoned city there was a godly (or perhaps *ungodly*) conflagration of light and smoke; one might be inclined to call the place a 'Ghost Town,' but here, ghosts are the least of anybody's worries. The flash hung in the air like a dole of doves and squirmed like a dumpster full of maggots. The light was blinding, yes, but it also carried a certain prominence that motivated all within its graces to bow their heads… all except for the House Madame.

Dragon Queen, the closest to the great light's ghastly epicenter, moved nothing but her heavy, mascara-scarred eyelids; she did not even so much as bring a cautionary hand to her brow. Her ravaged and bruised legs dripped with torrid blood that was her own while her chin collected thick crimson dregs that were not. To say, by this point, that she had been through hell would be a gross understatement. By that token, she had already looked right into the tired face of the devil, saw the nine dark circles under his eyes, and scoffed. Out of numerous battles and innumerable gallons of blood spilled, Dragon Queen was called *winner*. At her feet: pools of vomit and puddles of urine, stacks of ribs and piles of broken teeth – little macabre forget-me-nots from warriors past. The Madame's masked crew were still fervently carting off the bodies, body parts, and peculiar charred remnants that looked a lot like body parts. The air was beginning to clear when Dragon Queen saw *them*. She pressed her tongue scornfully against her pointed teeth. The prestigious and pestilent House Madame

fingered the jagged femur that was her armrest; the show was about to begin.

As the audience too regained sight, a deathly hush fell over them. Dragon Queen's ears perked to a peculiar and disheartening sound – that of gelatinous meat sliding over sandpaper. Out of the mostly dissipated smoke staggered a carrion-encrusted entity. The rotted hominid edged closer and closer, pulling its useless left leg behind it like a gravedigger's shovel. Dragon Queen did not tear her eyes away from the disgusting being as she spoke, "Zombie…" The word came softly but spitefully, seeping from her lips like blood from a reopened wound.

She then heard a coarse, pummeling growl and flinched, but only slightly. Then the filthy beast appeared, leaping into Dragon Queen's view from the remaining sprawl of smoke. It growled again through its large, gritted teeth. Suddenly, it took to its burly hind legs. Its hair stood like needles, its eyes burned like napalm. Yet, Dragon Queen did not even take a single step back. She only muttered vehemently under her breath, "Werewolf…" Her long gnarled fingers tensed just about into claws. The three grotesque combatants stood in a perfect triangle, mere feet from one another. High up in the stands, the voluptuous and venomous Madame sneered amusedly.

Dwight, the frightening man-wolf, made the first move. He took to the air from a pulse of his great hind legs. Glinting claws outstretched, he pounced upon Dragon Queen's position with surreal speed. She smartly sidestepped, only feeling the effects of the nail on Dwight's outstretched pinky finger, which still pried open a sizable gash on her cheek. Jayradikill the post-mortem warrior, slumped closer to the action. Dragon

Queen and Dwight, vampire and werewolf, met in a heated grapple. Though wearing the wounds of war, the vampiress held her own against the wolf, keeping his treacherous maw at bay with her left hand while slashing at his leather-like belly-flesh with her right. Meanwhile, the automaton with the milky film over its eyes inched ever closer.

Through the struggle, Dwight struck the vampiress at her exposed shoulder. A rough bloody chunk left her flesh with a juicy slap and arched into the raucous crowd. Nicholas Coffin chortled as his son retrieved the blood-riddled souvenir from the area around his feet.

"Can I, dad?" Little Chris Coffin held the warm modicum of skin and muscle out before his watery eyes.

"Oh, of course, son. What kind of father would I be if I said no?"

Dragon Queen yelped hard but did not relent. She reared back her hand and swiped a baleful slash just above the beast's blackish belly button. His liquid insides crept curiously to the surface and, once the coast was clear, filed through the impromptu orifice. Dwight sounded his displeasure to the heavens above. The enraged vampiress delved her hand deeper into the meaty cavity and rifled through the beast's vital organs. Dwight screamed the blood-drenched scream of a man lacerated before whimpering like man's best friend on death's dog-bed.

Dragon Queen finally excised a greenish tubular prize – presumably a segment of his large or small intestine – and whipped it into the uproarious audience. The slimy organ flew through a group of emerald ghosts seated in the third row, smacking the bleachers behind them with a squishy thud. The

middle phantom looked to the others, there was a tinge of shock across his features, yet no more than you would expect from an entity bound not by mortality: “Oh dear.” He spoke sardonically through an upturning grin.

Finally sidling up, Jayradikill made for the werewolf’s quivering bicep, its diseased teeth seeking flesh, seeking sustenance. Yet, instead, it caught the behemoth’s straining backhand upside its head as it flung out in struggle and pain, cocking the zombie’s head grotesquely down to its shoulder. A bemused breath left his emaciated lips, a feeling his former human self would have certainly categorized as disappointment. Putting a firm palm to his scalp, the zombie righted its head. Its neck crackled and projected a slivery bone-chip into the crowd which hit and pierced Dr. A, a surgeon in the seventh row. The good doctor glanced to his forearm with dejection and lethargy, where the bone-chip had stuck, then focused back on the action.

As the zombie positioned its skull back to its liking, it noticed the virulent vampiress had already felled the beast. She was straddling its gaping midsection and clawing away without aim, without pattern, and without reserve. She howled and squalled at uncomfortably high pitches, proving herself even louder than her unfortunate prey. The House Madam looked on, upright in her seat, sensing every rip and every tear deep inside her gut and along her thighs.

Mick, an empathetic werewolf in the audience, cried out as Dwight wheezed out the last few breaths he would ever take. The tension left every muscle like fleeing insects. The vengeful vampiress then felt two cold – deathly cold – hands grasp at the back of her throat. She rose and quickly vaulted back, up and

over the human-like creature. The zombie stood, filled with as much confusion as his primeval brain would allow. Dragon Queen then forced her hand into its back, easily navigating through the leprous tissue. Latching onto its spine, she yanked it out like the pit from a rotten peach. The zombie's desecrated torso fell back, causing it to double up on itself like a decomposing Jack hanging outside of its equally decomposing Box.

With a sinister grin stretched over her lips, Dragon Queen hurled the bone trophy into the crowd. It fell at the feet of two bloodthirsty adolescents.

"See, *I told you* that zombie was spineless." Alex enjoyed his joke a little more than his female companion, Shelley. Yet, soon after, she too joined in the laughter.

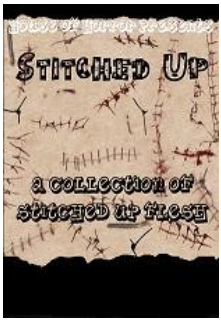
Believing herself the victor, Dragon Queen raised her arms and let loose a long, gravelly shriek. She immediately caught the viperous eyes of the House Madame, who returned her a look of discontentment; the show was not over yet.

With the top half of its body slumped over its pelvis and legs, the zombie slapped its cold, bloated fingers around Dragon Queen's ankle. It then buried its black and hollowed teeth into the vampiress' calf with predatory grace, staring blankly off at nothing in particular. Dragon Queen yelped, more frustrated than anything else. She forced the ravenous body from her leg and gazed down at the freshly gushing blood. Disgusted, she wiped it and the black saliva from her calf and headed off, off toward a nearby pit of razor wire and broken glass; she could feel the change welling up from each extremity. She was downright nauseated, loathing the idea of becoming one of *those* things.

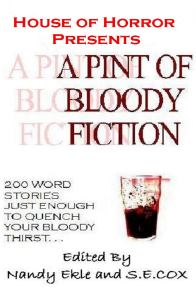
Dragon Queen cast herself into the hazardous hole. The airborne blood misted a married couple seated in the front row. Rick looked amiably to his wife, Debra. He would have seen the child-like smile across her face if it wasn't for the large steel muzzle around her nose, mouth, and jaw. Rick offered her a convivial, side-armed embrace.

A strange silence took the crowd – that is, until the House Madame rose from her seat and curtsied before her disfigured champion. Rocking fidgetingly from left to right, the zombie stood as winner with his head held high – well, (thanks to Dragon Queen's dexterous fingers and surgical precision) with his head held as high as his own cold, withered ankles.

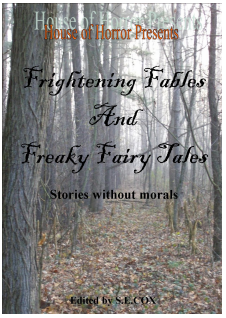
More from House of Horror



£9.99


House of Horror Presents
A Pint of Bloody Fiction
200 word stories just enough to quench your bloody thirst...
Edited By
Nandy Ekle and S.E.COX

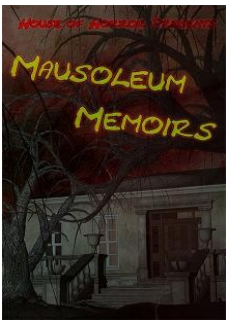
£6.99



£9.99

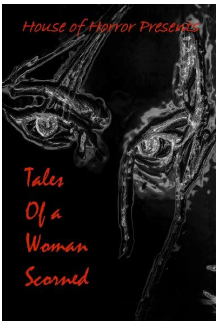
£10.99

£12.99



£9.99

Coming Soon From House of Horror

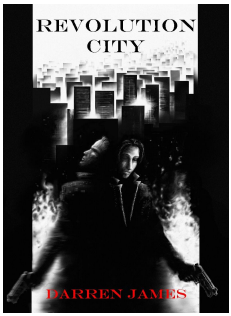


Tales of a Woman Scorned

An Anthology of female revenge tales. How far will these women go to get what they want.
Coming November 2010

House of Horror Best of 2010

A Collection of all the best work from House of Horror 2010
Coming November 2010



Revolution City By Darren James
The first book in a series of Sci-Fi Novels.
Coming December 2010

False Awakenings By S.E.COX
A Psychological Thriller.
Coming January 2011